
A
CONVENIENT
Escape
THE HARCOURTS: ANOTHER GENERATION
PENNY FAIRBANKS

A Convenient Escape

The Harcourts: Another Generation

Penny Fairbanks

Also by Penny Fairbanks

Resolved in Love Series:

Behind The Baron's Mask

Healing The Captain's Heart

Finding The Artisan's Future

Embracing The Earl's Dream

The Harcourts Series:

Anna's Decision

Dalton's Challenge

Caroline's Discovery

Patrick's Arrangement

Harriet's Proposal

The Harcourts: Another Generation Series:

A Convenient Escape

A Convenient Escape © 2021 by Penny Fairbanks

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

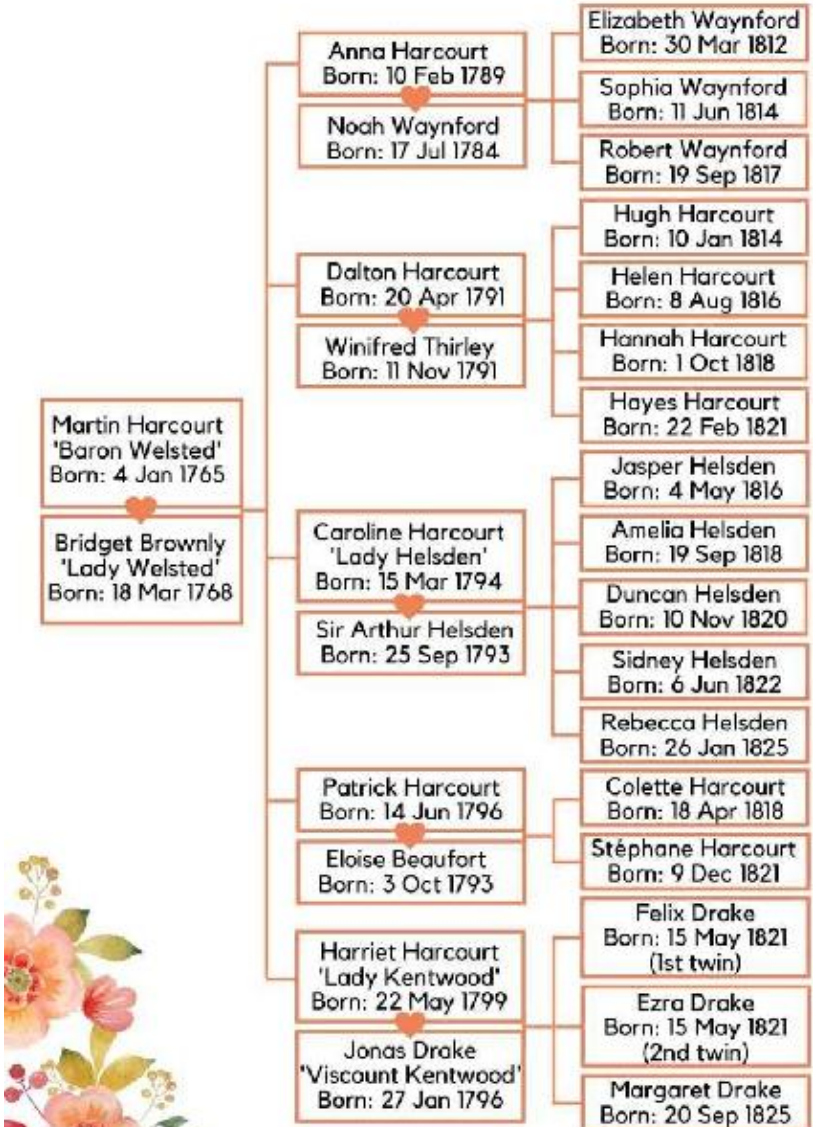
Cover design by German Creative

Family tree by MeganJoyCrafts

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First Printing: September 2021

Family Tree Chart



Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Epilogue

About the Author

Chapter 1



June 1831

Beth watched the handsome young man seated beside her, his thick blond locks brushing against his forehead in a very charming way. He smiled as he spoke, his words going in one of Beth's ears and out the other. She offered a pleasant smile of her own, though it did not touch her eyes.

Twisting her gloved fingers into her green skirts, Beth came to the uncomfortable conclusion that Mr. Stallworth was, in fact, not her true love.

Still, she did her duty and listened to the gentleman regale her with tales of his friend's recent ball where a poor old matron's generously puffed sleeve had caught fire on an ill placed sconce. Mr. Stallworth, for reasons unknown to Beth, found this story to be wonderfully hilarious.

"Can you believe such a thing?" he said through his laughter, nodding at Beth, encouraging her to agree. "I swear, I have never seen something so absurd. I have not the faintest clue why you ladies insist upon such cumbersome sleeves."

Beth offered an awkward chuckle, not fully able to condone her suitor's sense of humor. "Alas, that is the style these days," she mumbled. Her eyes darted down to her own sleeves, modestly round so as to still be fashionable yet not so large that they might potentially catch fire.

"Fear not, Miss Waynford," Mr. Stallworth added in a

condescendingly comforting tone. “I find your sleeves to be of the appropriate size.”

“What a relief,” she offered with a strained smile.

Luckily for her, she did not have to try much harder to appease the young man. He quickly launched into another topic, words rapidly spilling from lips that Beth had once thought she might kiss someday.

The thought of that possibility with Mr. Stallworth no longer made Beth’s heart flutter. Instead, it made her all the more desperate to quit his presence. Of course, when they had first met two months ago, Beth had found him to be almost unbearably handsome. Unfortunately, after having spent many outings with him during that time, Beth had discovered that he did not possess much else to entice her affections. Tonight’s dinner and the following conversation period in the drawing room had only solidified Beth’s conclusion.

When she was sure Mr. Stallworth paid her no mind as he chattered on, Beth cast her eyes about the room, searching for an easy escape route. Not being terribly loquacious herself, she often found it difficult to weave a plausible and polite excuse into the natural flow of conversation.

To her immense relief, Beth managed to catch her Aunt Caroline’s eye. The older woman, as always, was surrounded by a circle of guests, all eager for her attention and favor. Aunt Caroline always situated herself so that she could maintain a full view of the room despite the people crowding around her. Gratitude swelled through Beth’s chest, straining against the firmness of her stays, at her aunt’s impeccable skills as a hostess.

In an amusing series of silent and subtle gestures, likely only possible in a close-knit family such as theirs, Beth communicated to Aunt Caroline that she needed rescuing from this gentleman. Aunt Caroline lifted a knowing brow. Beth bit her lip and returned her attention to Mr. Stallworth, who apparently still had no idea that his lady’s thoughts had wandered elsewhere—and that the lady herself planned to wander away at the first opportunity.

Aunt Caroline had been surprised when Beth had specifically requested that she invite Mr. Stallworth and his family to her dinner, claiming that she wanted to get to know him a bit more before making a final decision. In her typical fashion, Aunt Caroline had playfully scoffed at this and said, “My darling niece, you can barely force the

gentleman's name out of your mouth. I daresay the decision has already been made."

From her peripheral vision, Beth noticed Aunt Caroline excuse herself from her present company and head toward another corner of the room. Mustering up the last of her willpower, Beth gave Mr. Stallworth a sweet smile. She would be free soon.

"Elizabeth, I am afraid I am quite ready to return home," a gentle voice said just behind Beth. She turned to see her parents approaching from the quiet section of the room they had claimed for themselves with Aunt Caroline's husband, Uncle Arthur.

"Such a shame." Mr. Stallworth frowned. "I did not yet finish my story."

"Another time, I am sure. My dear wife is rather tired," Papa said in his deep, authoritative tone. His sharp eyes watched the young man carefully, reading him.

Mama put a hand on Beth's shoulder, smiling down at her daughter and Mr. Stallworth with tender kindness. "If you will excuse us, Mr. Stallworth."

"Thank you for a wonderful evening." Beth rushed the words out and slipped between her parents, forcing herself to maintain a ladylike walking speed through the drawing room.

An uncomfortable tingle shot down her spine at the thought of Mr. Stallworth's disappointment. She longed to fly right through the door to escape it, but such behavior would be terribly rude and no doubt make the rounds through Society. The last thing Beth needed now was to limit her pool of potential suitors.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Beth?" Aunt Caroline asked with a teasing glint in her eyes when Beth and her parents approached their host and hostess to bid their farewells.

"Of course I did," Beth said, knowing perfectly well how feeble she sounded.

"Perhaps you will enjoy yourself even better next time—after we pare down our guest list," Uncle Arthur offered with an understanding smile and a quick glance to Mr. Stallworth, who had already found a new audience to finish telling his tale to.

Beth nodded, looking down at the hem of her skirt. She always felt so embarrassed when it came time to cut ties with another suitor, though she knew none of her family would fault her for it. They all

wanted to see her happily married, just like themselves. They had all certainly been through their own fair share of trials to find those happy marriages, as Beth and her siblings and their many cousins had heard over the years.

Papa wrapped a strong arm around Beth's shoulders, pulling her tight into his side. "I think we had best get our dear daughter home," he said lovingly. "Those of us on the quieter spectrum have had our fill of…interesting conversation."

Beth stifled a giggle as she offered Aunt Caroline and Uncle Arthur a small wave, allowing her father to lead her toward the door with Mama offering any last goodbyes to other guests on their way out. Indeed, Beth and her parents were some of the most reserved members of their large family. She offered a silent prayer of thanks for their understanding which had extracted her from uncomfortable and overwhelming situations many times.

Thankfully, neither of them said anything else as they made their way through the Helsdens' home and settled into their carriage for the short ride to their own nearby townhouse just a few streets away. As always, Mama and Papa sat as close together as possible, holding hands and looking very in love.

The mood in the carriage tonight felt slightly different. Rather than talking quietly about the evening or sitting in comfortably silent reflection, Beth noticed both their gazes on her. She did not look directly at them, shrinking as much as possible into the firm cushion behind her, angling her head so that her acceptable sleeve puff would hide her face.

Attention always made her anxious. She suffered through it anyway in the hopes of finding a husband. No young lady could expect to catch a gentleman's eye without putting herself on display to an appropriate and polite degree.

Based on the nervous twinge in Beth's stomach, she sensed that Mama and Papa also had her marriage prospects on their minds. From the corner of her eye, Beth could see their worried expressions. This only made her want to shrink even further. Her parents had never put pressure on her to marry a certain type of man or to marry within a certain timeframe. Their only requirement, as they said time and again, was that their daughter be happy with her choice.

Beth had not made her desires a secret. She had wanted nothing

more than to fall madly in love, preferably at first sight, and certainly within her first Season. That, as Mama and Papa knew, had not been going according to plan as Beth was now nearing the end of her second Season.

The three Waynfords ascended the front steps of their townhouse and then up the first flight of stairs in thoughtful silence broken only by the occasional creaking floorboard. Mama and Papa walked with Beth down the hallway of the children's rooms and paused outside her door as they did every night when they returned from some late event.

"Goodnight, my love," Papa whispered, leaning down to kiss the top of Beth's head. He squeezed Mama's hand before going back the way they had come to take a different hallway toward their quarters.

"Beth, could I have a word with you?" Mama asked, her soft voice already so quiet that she did not need to whisper. Her dark hair, much like Beth's, glimmered in the light from the last remaining candle in the hallway. Mama looked rather like an angel at times like this. It made Beth's anxious defenses melt.

With a small nod, Beth opened her bedroom door and led them inside. Mama lit the candle on the small table in the corner, flanked by two chairs ready to accept them. As soon as both ladies sat, Mama leaned forward and took Beth's hands in hers. As irrational as she knew such a notion to be, Beth could not bear the possibility of seeing disappointment in her mother's eyes. Instead, she kept her gaze fixed to their now gloveless hands grasping each other.

"Tell me how your time with Mr. Stallworth went," Mama prodded delicately.

For a moment, Beth considered lying and trying to convince her mother that nothing was amiss, that her courtship would continue its march toward marriage. Admitting otherwise would only bring Beth one step closer to confronting other truths she did not yet want to acknowledge.

"Dearest Beth, please tell me truthfully." The gentle firmness in Mama's words, even the fact that she had pulled Beth aside to have this discussion, told her that lying would be no use. Her parents were smart and observant. They already knew of Beth's worries. They simply did not want her to bear them alone.

"He is not the one, Mama," Beth finally confessed, unable to keep the hint of defeat out of her voice. "He was so handsome and

charming when we first met, but surely there would have been a spark by now if he was my true love."

Mama gave a deep sigh. Beth dared to glance up and found her mother watching her with genuine disappointment—not because of Beth, but for her. "I am sorry to hear that, daughter. It is a shame, but it is better to know now."

A sudden urge to dispel the gloom in the air overcame Beth. She never liked to make anyone sad, especially not her lovely mama. She lifted her head and met Mama's gaze with a brave smile.

"Do not worry overmuch, Mama. I know the right man is just around the corner." As she spoke, Beth prayed that the confidence of her words would sink deeper into her own heart. She would not miss Mr. Stallworth when she slowly stopped accepting his invitations for outings, and she knew he would not truly miss her either. Unfortunately, the problem was much larger than just him.

The other woman nodded slowly. Her warm eyes watched her daughter, a few fine lines appearing at the corners that, in Beth's opinion, only made her more beautiful.

"You know, my dear, that there is nothing wrong with taking your time. It will happen precisely when it is meant to, just as it did for me and your father."

"I remember," Beth chuckled.

How could she forget her parents' own great love story? She had been raised on retellings of their romance, of how Mama had nearly given up on finding a husband after several fruitless Seasons before finally meeting Papa. They had lived happily ever after, raising three children and falling deeper in love every day. Beth wanted that so desperately—though she did not want to suffer through the anxiety of waiting numerous Seasons for it. After all, a young lady's prospects narrowed with every birthday. Compared to last year, Beth had certainly noticed a decline in the number of gentlemen who had shown an interest in her this time around once they found out this was her second Season. Her desire to find a husband this year had only grown more urgent. Beth bit her lip and let her eyes drop to the floral patterned rug.

"I remember…" she continued, quiet and downcast. "I will still pray for a miracle. I will need one at this rate. The Season will be coming to an end next month and we will be on our way home."

Mama stood, coaxing Beth up with her. She gave Beth an understanding smile and pulled her into a hug. Though they were almost the same height, Beth found herself nestling into Mama's comforting arms.

"I will be praying for you, too, my sweet Beth," Mama whispered into her daughter's hair. "For now, get some rest. We're meeting with Lord Shawberry and his family tomorrow for a walk at Hyde Park after lunch."

Beth sprang up to her full height, an eager energy lifting her spirits at the news. "Mr. Quincy will be there as well?"

Mama chuckled, patting Beth's cheek. "Indeed. I thought that would cheer you up. I will send a maid up to help ready you for bed. Goodnight, darling."

With one last smile, Mama floated through Beth's room and back out into the hallway, closing the door behind her with barely a sound. After the initial excitement subsided, Beth sank down onto the thick blankets—floral to match the rug—of her bed. A comfortable warmth replaced it.

"Heavens, Mr. Quincy will want to hear all about tonight's dinner," Beth mumbled to herself as she reached up to tug a few pins from her hair while waiting for the maid.

She had become good friends with Mr. Weston Quincy, Lord Shawberry's son and heir, as soon as they had met last Season. Their families had scheduled numerous outings and events each week and they had done the same this year.

Beth greatly enjoyed Mr. Quincy's friendly company. He always listened so intently and laughed and commiserated with her as they navigated the complex and sometimes ridiculous marriage mart of London.

She suppressed a pout as she pulled a few loose dark brown locks over her shoulder, gently running her fingers through her hair to untangle any knots. In truth, Beth had thought at one point that Mr. Quincy would ask to court her. On rare occasions, such as tonight after coming to terms with yet another unsuitable suitor, it bothered Beth that he hadn't.

Mr. Quincy had never shown an ounce of romantic interest in Beth. Thus, they had grown into very good friends who shared the ups and downs of their Seasons with each other.

Beth always looked forward to her time with Mr. Quincy. She had not met anyone so far who understood her quite like he did.

Chapter 2

No sooner had Weston crested the gentle rise of the bridge spanning the Serpentine than a lovely sight on the other side caught his attention. Miss Waynford noticed him at the same moment. She beamed and offered a wave that was a touch too enthusiastic for a proper young lady. Weston grinned as well, returning an even more energetic wave. He trotted forward to close the distance between them, leaving behind his mother's mutters about his embarrassing manners.

What did Weston care about manners when someone was this happy to see him? His heart grew progressively warmer the closer he came to his dear friend—his beautiful, kind, charming friend.

"Lord and Lady Shawberry, good afternoon," Mrs. Waynford said with her always pleasant smile that her oldest child had inherited. Weston's parents returned the greetings warmly.

With the formalities out of the way, Miss Waynford accepted Weston's offered arm, her small lace covered hand resting comfortably on his dark brown coat sleeve. They continued down the path behind their parents in an easy silence that Weston found uncommon among the rest of his friends and acquaintances. He watched Miss Waynford's profile from the corner of his eye. She looked lovely as always with her hair pulled into an intricate style and her blue eyes staring straight ahead with a kind softness completely unique to their owner.

Miss Waynford smiled at everyone they passed, her natural grace evident in every polite nod. A fleeting twinge strummed Weston's heart. He knew they must look like a courting couple to everyone who saw them. He quickly suppressed that thought and the longing that followed immediately on its heels.

“The weather is just so perfect today, is it not?” Weston broke the silence, more for his sake than for any real need to speak. He needed the distraction.

Surprised, as if she had been entirely lost in thought, Miss Waynford’s head whipped around to peer up at Weston—yet another one of her charming points since Weston himself was just below average in height. With a tight lipped smile, she returned her gaze to the shady path ahead of them as their group approached a handsome tunnel of trees. Her free hand fiddled with her soft yellow silk skirts. Weston noticed a muscle tensing in her exposed shoulder.

“Lovely indeed,” she offered quietly.

Weston’s eyes narrowed at her. Miss Waynford, though always on the quieter and more observant side, seemed more subdued than usual. Though they did not always fill their walks or dances or carriage rides with conversation, she usually had something thoughtful or sweet to say.

“No comment on the cheery birdsong today?” he asked, keeping his voice light and teasing.

Miss Waynford nodded sheepishly. “Very charming. I am sure I can hear a goldfinch somewhere nearby. Perhaps we will catch a glimpse of him if we are lucky.”

Weston’s mouth pulled to one side as he contemplated her answer. Most anyone else would be satisfied with it. Weston, on the other hand, knew Miss Waynford quite well by now to realize that she was more than just unusually introspective.

“Would you tell me what is on your mind, Miss Waynford?” he asked, offering a gentle smile when she glanced up at him.

With a forlorn sigh, the young lady dropped her eyes to the gravel path. Her plump bottom lip jutted out ever so slightly in an expression that Weston found to be almost unbearably endearing. He forced his heart to resume normal pace. One did not think about brushing a finger against their friend’s lip.

“We went to dinner last night at my Aunt Caroline’s and Uncle Arthur’s townhouse,” she mumbled.

“It did not go well?” Weston prodded. He also knew that Miss Waynford typically felt better when she shared her thoughts and concerns, even if it took a bit of patient coaxing to get her there.

Miss Waynford looked up again, gaze unfocused as she recalled the

previous evening. “For the most part, it was perfectly wonderful.”

Weston chuckled. “I would expect nothing less from a fashionable and sought-after event hosted by Lady Helsden.” After having grown close to the Waynfords, Weston’s family had been invited to a few such dinners as well as a ball offered by the baronet and baronetess. They never disappointed, so something else must have happened to put his friend in a gloomy mood.

“Aunt Caroline always does an excellent job,” Miss Waynford agreed with a small smile. “Unfortunately, I asked her to invite one of my suitors, Mr. Stallworth. I came to the inevitable conclusion last night that he is not the one for me after all.”

Weston’s brow furrowed and his shoulders drooped. “Miss Waynford, I am terribly sorry to hear that. But I urge you not to give up. I truly believe that you will find the perfect man when the time is right. You deserve nothing less.”

Despite the minuscule protest somewhere deep in his chest, Weston meant every word he said. His heart ached to see the sadness and dwindling hope in his friend’s eyes and the brave smile she wore despite her fears.

He wanted nothing more than to stop in the middle of Hyde Park and pull Miss Waynford into his arms, to soothe her and reassure her that she was wonderful and would find a lucky gentleman to cherish her for all her days. Of course, even for good friends, such an action would be wildly inappropriate. Instead, Weston put his hand over Miss Waynford’s where it clung to his forearm. At least he could provide this much comfort without crossing any boundaries.

To his relief, Miss Waynford’s smile became more genuine as she looked at him again. “Thank you, Mr. Quincy. I will continue on because you have so much faith in me.”

Weston stood taller, pleased to have made Miss Waynford’s day a touch brighter. He wanted to see more of that lovely smile.

“I have just the thing to cheer you up,” he announced brightly. “You will forget all about your suitor after you hear this woeful tale.”

Miss Waynford giggled behind her free hand, a loose almost black curl brushing against her temple. “You always seem to find yourself in woeful tales.”

“Only so I can report back to you and lift your spirits if they are low, or raise them further if they are already high,” Weston answered

truthfully. Heat prickled under the skin at the back of his neck as he realized that he did unfortunately encounter perhaps an usual amount of mishaps where the fairer sex were concerned. Still, he could never mind them for too long if he thought it would interest Miss Waynford, if it would make her smile or laugh or commiserate with him.

"A few nights ago, I attended a ball where I asked a particular lady who shall remain nameless to dance the next set with me," he started, easily slipping into his storytelling air that always made Miss Waynford's eyes grow round with surprise or made her gasp with shock. She was without a doubt his best audience.

"We had been talking all evening, quite pleasantly, I thought. And we had met on a few occasions previously so I felt rather confident that she would accept with some measure of happiness. But just before I could finish the question, another dashing gentleman came along and asked her for the next set. I daresay the fellow did not even notice me, which I suppose I cannot blame him for since this lady is quite a beauty. To my disappointment, she accepted him and they danced the next set and I never saw her again for the whole rest of the evening. Can you believe it?"

Weston finished with a rueful chuckle and a shrug of his blessedly broad shoulders. At least if he did not boast a respectable height, he could claim a fashionably masculine physique in its stead. Miss Waynford stared at him, mouth opening and closing as she fought to find a response.

"Mr. Quincy, that is so unfortunate and very unkind of that lady! Surely she should have allowed you to finish asking and then accepted you since you came first," she cried, her indignation coloring her high cheekbones. The color deepened when she noticed an older couple watching her with upturned noses.

Weston patted her hand to distract her from the inconsequential onlookers. He could not help grinning at her suddenly restored energy.

"Please do not tell me it was Miss Adams," Miss Waynford added under her breath to keep from drawing any more attention. Weston had mentioned a Miss Adams before with hopes that he might start courting her if he sensed her interest. Based on her reaction at the aforementioned ball, he had already resolved to let that aspiration go.

Weston chewed on his lip, looking down at Miss Waynford from

the corner of his eye. He lifted his brow in that teasing way that she always pretended to be frustrated by. “Goodness, I seem to have forgotten. Just as well since I did say the lady would remain nameless.”

Miss Waynford chuckled and shook her head, her smile finally spreading across her face. Her bright blue eyes caught the sunlight just right for a moment, transforming into miniature reflections of the summer sky above. “Regardless, that was not a kind or polite thing to do. I am sorry you experienced that, my dear friend.”

An uncomfortable lump lodged itself into Weston’s throat at the sincerity in Miss Waynford’s voice. He forced out a nonchalant laugh. “Do not worry about me, Miss Waynford. These things happen on occasion—to me in particular, it seems. I assure you I am quite used to it by now. Someday I will find a lady who is not so overcome by tall builds or perhaps a lady who finds red hair to be perfectly fashionable—charming, even.”

The young lady paused in the middle of the path. Weston stopped beside her. Miss Waynford angled herself to face him, a serious expression falling over her delicate features.

“I shall say the same to you as you have said to me. Do not lose hope. Any lady would be blessed beyond measure to have you and I have faith that you will find the right woman soon.”

Every word, carried in her sweet, genuine voice, stung at Weston’s heart. He glanced at his parents who had walked ahead a ways with Mr. and Mrs. Waynford, recalling the unpleasant conversation they’d had just that morning. Weston’s jaw clenched. He had happily put that out of his mind while walking with his friend. Unfortunately, Miss Waynford’s well-meaning encouragement only reminded Weston of the situation his parents had thrust upon him. His stomach twisted with disappointment and an unsettling anxiety.

“Mr. Quincy? Are you unwell?” Miss Waynford asked, taking Weston’s hand in hers with a concerned frown.

Weston forced his mind back to the present, to the wonderful woman standing before him. He could not bring himself to offer his usual beaming smile. Instead, he settled for squeezing Miss Waynford’s hand and turning them back to the path so they would not fall too far behind their parents.

“I was simply thinking that there is still time for a miracle to

happen—hopefully for us both," Weston lied, praying that Miss Waynford would move on from the topic. Sensing his discomfort, she nodded with a hesitant half-smile and instead praised the delicious food at her aunt's dinner.

Weston's heart sank further the longer they walked though they never touched upon the subject of suitors or marriage again. Once he had been reminded of his own lost cause, he could not banish it from his mind. It tainted the rest of their outing.

Of course, Weston had no doubt that Miss Waynford could find a miracle in this last month of the Season. It was himself he could not apply his own words to. His parents had made that perfectly clear.

Chapter 3



Still warm from the heat of an early summer midday, Beth fanned herself with a gloved hand as she huffed up the stairs to the children's wing of the Waynfords' townhouse. She could not wait to change into a lighter day dress and loosen her stays a bit. The sound of slightly raised voices in the hallway gave her pause. With a sigh, she abandoned her plan and shifted course to the children's shared sitting room.

She found her younger siblings seated across from each other at a small table, a mess of a chess board spread before them. The pieces Sophie had collected stood primly by her side of the board, arranged in size order. Rob's pieces, on the other hand, rolled about the table and some had even fallen onto the floor.

"Robert, pick up those pieces before someone slips on them," Beth chided as she strode into the room.

Sophie snickered behind her hand as Rob scrunched his nose and bent to the side to scoop the fallen pieces, his eyes never leaving the board lest his older sister try to cheat.

"That was not very ladylike, Sophia," Beth scolded again with an amused smile. As proper as her younger sister liked to be, she still had her moments of what most of Society would consider to be unbecoming behavior.

"I will not be out for another year yet," Sophie protested with a shrug. "I can be silly in our own sitting room from time to time."

Beth grinned and kissed Sophie atop her soft light brown hair. "You can be silly in here whenever you like. Isn't that right, Rob?"

She turned to her still sulking brother and pushed her lips out in an exaggerated pout, her hands forming claws as she slowly

approached his side of the table before finally pouncing and smothering him in loud kisses. His laughter echoed through the room, louder and brighter than anyone else's.

"Ugh, Beth!" he whined between giggles and attempts to wiggle out of her grasp. "I am too old for kisses!"

"Nonsense!" Beth insisted, though she stopped her attack and instead pulled the boy into a suffocating hug.

"Beth, Sophie is going to cheat if I'm not watching!"

"I would never," Sophie gasped with a hand over her heart in faux shock. "It goes entirely against my principles."

"Very well then, I will leave you to it." Beth finally conceded and released Rob from her grasp, smoothing out his dark hair that had become disheveled in their tussle. The two younger Waynfords easily slipped back into the game, eyes immediately focused. Rob's remained on Sophie's king while Sophie's wandered the entire board, calculating her strategy.

Beth watched as they played in silence, quietly amused to see her energetic thirteen-year-old brother so engrossed in a stationary activity. He never thought so, but exercising his mind always proved to be just as rewarding as running about the room or playing lawn games—especially if he won. Beth glanced at Sophie, wondering what she had done to goad him into this game.

"Drat!" Rob cried when Sophie deftly stole his last knight. He swung his fist down on the corner of the table, almost causing numerous pieces to tumble away. The boy glowered from the board to Beth, blue eyes flashing. "It might look like I'm losing but I am not," he grumbled. "Sophie has promised to sneak into the kitchens and steal a full tray of biscuits right from under Mrs. Brett's nose if I win."

"That sounds quite motivating," Beth chuckled, nodding her approval of Sophie's methods. "Well, since I am sure this will turn into a bloodbath shortly and I do not want to be called as a witness, I will go change my dress."

"Wait, how was dinner at Aunt Caroline's last night? You did not mention it at all at breakfast this morning," Sophie asked in an offhand manner that did not quite work as well as she intended, watching Beth from the corner of her eye.

"It was lovely as always," Beth answered with as cheery a smile as she could muster.

Naturally, Sophie saw right through her older sister's façade. "What really happened, Beth?"

Knowing she had already been defeated by the powerful observational skills Sophie shared with Papa, Beth sighed and confessed, "I am going to turn down Mr. Stallworth after all."

Rob grimaced and made a retching sound. "Can you please talk about this later? I do not want to hear about suitors and marriage and all that nonsense."

His older sisters burst into laughter at his childlike disgust. "Go on then so we can talk about this horrid business away from your precious ears." Sophie flicked her hand in a shooing motion.

"But what about the game?" Rob demanded, sitting up straighter and crossing his arms over his chest.

"We will continue it later, I promise. Now go see if Mama or Papa will take you to play with some of our cousins," Sophie suggested.

"I only want to play with Hugh," the boy grumbled again, sinking back into his chair.

Beth leaned down and put a hand on the back of Rob's head, petting him gently. "You will see Hugh soon. He will be home from Eton for the summer holiday before you know it."

At that Rob perked up. He worshiped his older cousin and always vowed to be just like him one day. He feigned disinterest in his other cousins who were closer in age though he always enjoyed spending time with them despite his initial protests.

"I cannot wait to ask Hugh all about Eton. I will be going there soon myself so I must know all about it. But I suppose for now someone else will do." He hopped up from his chair and bounded toward the sitting room door.

As soon as Rob closed the door behind him, Sophie stood from her chair and faced Beth. "Out with it."

Beth chuckled at her sister's candid and forthright nature. Though Beth certainly did not possess such qualities, she appreciated them in Sophie at times like this. Beth gestured to two chairs in the corner and they settled in.

"I have decided to set Mr. Stallworth free. That is the second suitor this week I have rejected," she confessed, staring down at her pale hands nestled among her yellow skirts.

Sophie reached over and patted Beth on her shoulder with a

sympathetic frown. “I am sorry to hear that, sister. But you know, you could always take my route and not marry at all,” she added with a rueful chuckle. Beth only pursed her lips at this.

“Forgive me.” Sophie pulled her hand back to her own lap and sighed. “I know how important it is for you to fall in love and marry.”

Beth nodded her acceptance of Sophie’s apology. She knew her sister only wanted to lighten the mood. Unfortunately, the frustration building up into a heavy stone in Beth’s stomach would not yield so easily. Words rose up through her chest and into her mouth, longing to spill. With an encouraging smile from Sophie, Beth finally let them out.

“I don’t know what is wrong, Sophie,” she started in a rush, surprised by the pleading tone in her own voice. “This is truly beginning to bother me. I came into my first Season so optimistic that I would find my true love in no time at all. I was crushed when that did not happen…. No doubt you remember curling up in bed with me while I cried for days after we returned to the country. Now my second Season is almost over and no matter how many eligible gentlemen I meet or how many suitors I entertain, none of them are right. None of them have made me feel the way I ought to feel when falling in love. Yes, they are handsome and charming in many ways, but there has been no true spark in my heart for any of them.”

The younger woman hummed and nodded thoughtfully, eyeing her sister for a long moment. “Well, Beth, that is because you have standards. You know what you want. And you should cling to that. Too often, women end up shackled to men who do not deserve them or who are simply not right for them for fear of ending up as spinsters. Please do not allow that to happen to you, my beloved sister, even if it does take multiple Seasons.”

Beth’s eyes widened at Sophie’s impassioned speech. Her sister had always been bright and introspective, yet Beth had not expected such mature words from her. Apparently, Sophie’s opinions on modern marriage—so different from her own—ran deeper than Beth had guessed.

“Mama said much of the same,” Beth confessed. “I know you are both right. Unfortunately, that does not lessen the sting when the reality is standing before my eyes.”

A curious expression passed over Sophie’s face as she continued to

stare at her older sister. “What of your friend, Mr. Quincy?”

Completely unbidden, an image of Mr. Quincy’s warm, comforting smile and friendly deep brown eyes flashed through Beth’s mind. Heat raced up the back of her neck and into her cheeks. “What of him?”

Sophie tilted her head, a lock of light brown hair trailing against her forehead, and lifted a brow.

Beth gasped when she finally caught on. Her mouth dropped open, something she would only do in the privacy of their sitting room. “Sophie! That will not happen.”

“Why not? He seems like a perfectly charming and kind gentleman and the two of you clearly get along very well.” Sophie tapped a finger against her chin, mind churning over this new possibility.

Beth gave a sharp sigh. “Mr. Quincy is just a very dear friend. He has not shown any particular interest in courting me in any case so that settles the matter.”

Sophie wrinkled her nose at this, clearly not believing her sister.

“I mean it!” Beth insisted, her blush deepening. Then she remembered their walk that afternoon, his unusually quiet mood, and that dreadful story he had told her about that young lady at the ball. She softened, pain lancing through her chest. She knew he had held something back from her today. “Mr. Quincy has been having his own issues in the marriage mart so we share our disappointing tales and listen to each other and give encouragement.”

Both of Sophie’s brows arched up now. “You two do seem very close indeed.”

“Stop it, Sophie,” Beth laughed, gently smacking her sister on the arm, her subtle gigot sleeve cushioning the blow. “Believe me, it makes me terribly sad to think of both of us being stuck in the same situation. But he never asked to court me nor did he behave in a way that hinted at more than friendliness. I must not be the type of woman he is attracted to, that is all. There has been no spark.”

Despite her own words, Beth once again saw Mr. Quincy’s wonderfully sweet smile in her memory, the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he laughed, and that one troublesome lock of bright red hair that he could never tame. Something squeezed her heart in a way she did not recognize and knew instinctively that she should not allow to continue.

Throat suddenly dry, Beth coughed and turned her full attention to

Sophie. “Why don’t we sneak into the kitchens and steal that tray of biscuits so Rob will be surprised when he comes home?”

To Beth’s great relief, Sophie’s round face split into an eager grin. “An excellent idea. Though it will not really be stealing since our dear cook can never say no to us.”

“We must not let Rob know that or he will take terrible advantage of poor Mrs. Brett,” Beth laughed.

Sophie nearly leaped up from her seat in almost the same way their younger brother had done earlier, her sights set on a new goal. Beth let Sophie lead the way through the sitting room and down the stairs to the kitchen, all the while willing her heart to slow to its natural pace.

Why had Sophie’s suggestion produced such an unsettled feeling in Beth? Why did thoughts of Mr. Quincy suddenly fill her stomach with an unfamiliar fluttering sensation?

Beth nearly bumped into Sophie who had stopped just outside the kitchen’s entryway. She held a finger up to her lips and waved for Beth to hurry in.

She shook her head, trying to return to the mischief at hand and free her mind of those questions that she already knew she could not and should not answer.



A gentle poke on Weston's shoulder brought his attention back to the Waynfords' drawing room. Miss Waynford leaned forward so she could peer into his face as they sat side by side on the sofa in the middle of the room.

"What is plaguing your mind today?" she asked gently, keeping her voice quiet so no one else would overhear.

Guilt pricked at Weston. He should not have let his mind wander, especially when he could have been spending this time enjoying Miss Waynford's company.

"Ah, well…" He hesitated, clearing his throat and looking about the room with its comforting cream wallpaper and classically modest furnishings. Dare he really tell Miss Waynford what had happened? What would happen? She watched his face with concern in her lovely eyes, waiting patiently.

"You see, my family is hosting a special dinner tonight." The words already felt so disingenuous as Weston spoke them, yet it was as close as he could come to the truth for now.

Miss Waynford sat up straighter with an intrigued smile. She must have already guessed what this special dinner entailed. "You must tell me more, Mr. Quincy."

Weston rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish chuckle. "I do not wish to give away too many details but…a young lady will be in attendance with her parents."

The way Miss Waynford's eyes lit up with excitement for him twisted Weston's heart. She pressed one hand to her lips while the other covered Weston's where it rested on his knee.

"Oh, how wonderful!" she cheered as quietly as possible. "I wish

you the best of luck. She could be the one!"

"You just might be right." Weston offered a tight smile and pulled his hand out from under Miss Waynford's to fiddle with the lock of hair by his right temple that never stayed in place. Her kind words and touches only caused his chest to throb with a dull, defeated ache.

"Come now, do not look so nervous," she continued. "Be yourself and the rest will fall into place."

Weston nodded silently. Despite her reassurances, Weston was not so sure. He was not sure he wanted her to be correct about the situation. Still, he smiled at his friend with genuine gratitude.

"Thank you as always, Miss Waynford, for your warmth and support."

She shifted closer to the edge of the sofa, eyes shining with anticipation. "Can we meet tomorrow so I can hear all the details?"

"Yes, of course," Weston agreed immediately before thinking better of it. Would he want to share the details of tonight's dinner? Still, he could never turn down an opportunity to spend time with Miss Waynford.

"We will be meeting my Aunt Harriet and Uncle Jonas at Vauxhall Gardens tomorrow night. You should join us so we can discuss your special dinner." Miss Waynford nodded eagerly until Weston finally agreed.

"I do not believe I have met this aunt and uncle yet, have I?" Weston asked, skillfully changing the subject.

Miss Waynford stared into the distance, her mouth scrunched to one corner in thought. "No, I do not believe so. But I am so eager to introduce you. You will adore them, I am sure. They are so kind and so entertaining."

Weston only half listened as Miss Waynford went on about her aunts and uncles and many cousins. He felt guilty for taking advantage of her love of speaking about her family, but he desperately needed to get away from the topic of tonight's dinner. He wondered with a heavy heart what exactly he would be telling Miss Waynford tomorrow at Vauxhall Gardens.

~

THE HIGH COLLAR around Weston's neck suddenly felt far too tight.

He slipped the tip of a finger in and tried to tug at it to no avail, quickly snatching his hand away when he saw the doorknob turning.

"The Cottsriff family," the butler announced in his grand voice as he opened the drawing room door with slow grace.

The Quincy family all stood, including Weston's younger sister and brother-in-law, and offered bows and curtseys to their guests who did the same as they entered the room. Mr. and Mrs. Cottsriff greeted their hosts with severe smiles while their daughter's eyes swept around the room, her chin thrust into the air so that she looked down her nose at everything. When it was her turn to address Mother and Father, she gave a close approximation of a smile. Though his parents seemed entirely occupied by the exciting potential outcome of this evening, Weston could see even from his position just behind Father that Miss Cottsriff would rather be anywhere but here.

So this was his potential bride?

Weston suppressed a shudder. He could already tell that he and Miss Cottsriff would not get on. There was nothing warm or caring in her.

"Make a positive first impression, son," Father hissed into Weston's ear, jabbing him in the side with his elbow. "And this is our son, Weston."

The baron gestured to his side and Weston stepped up with what he hoped was a charming and easy smile that would hide his immense discomfort. "Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Cottsriff, Miss Cottsriff. I am so pleased to make your acquaintance."

"A pleasure indeed, Mr. Quincy. This is our youngest daughter, Phoebe." Mrs. Cottsriff put a firm hand on the young lady's shoulder and urged her to step forward. Clearly, the older Cottsriffs were not as oblivious as Weston's parents.

"Good evening, Mr. Quincy," Miss Cottsriff said, her voice just a touch nasal. It seemed to scrape over Weston's name. She almost sounded offended to have to say it.

"This here is my youngest, Louise, and her husband Mr. Geoffrey Barber," Mother continued, waving for her other child and son-in-law to come closer. She beamed as Louise and Geoffrey said their pleasantries. Weston knew she was immensely proud to introduce her married daughter who had managed to secure a future baron just like her own husband.

It stung a little to see that pride and affection, to know why this meeting was happening in the first place. Weston averted his gaze, no longer able to look at his future bride. He was a failure when it came to love. He could not even find his own wife so his parents had done it for him.

"Ah, here is the tea," Father announced as a footman entered bearing a blindingly silver tray with teapot, cups, and plates of biscuits and tarts.

Mother leaned behind Louise and caught Weston's eye. She tilted her head toward the small sofa. Weston nodded, dread swelling through his entire body.

"Miss Cottsriff, would you like to join me over here?" Weston held his hand out and the young lady marched toward the sofa without a word or even a look in his direction. Weston's lips pressed into a grim smile as he followed.

He gestured for the footman to come by and he poured tea for himself and the young lady. She gingerly accepted the cup from him, barely allowing their gloved fingers to touch.

"Tell me, Miss Cottsriff, how have you been enjoying London?" Weston asked with as much polite cheer as he could manage.

Miss Cottsriff's narrowed eyes drifted up to Weston's face. He noted their unique icy blue color, so unlike another pair of blue eyes he knew.

"It has been fine—for the most part," she snipped, returning her attention to her teacup.

Weston suspected with a surge of embarrassment that she did not include him in "the most part." In fact, she seemed to think Weston beneath her notice until he attempted conversation again. She could not outright ignore that without appearing rude in the extreme, much as she apparently wanted to.

His heart sank to a depth he had not thought possible. Of course Miss Cottsriff was not the woman for him…not if he wanted love. He likely could not even count on a pleasantly platonic companionship with her.

Suddenly desperate to end this madness, Weston glanced over his shoulder at his parents, hoping that he could silently convey that he could not go through with this. Instead, their encouraging smiles sent his heart plummeting further. How could he bear to disappoint them

after they had been so patient?

Weston turned back to Miss Cottsriff. She appeared not to notice his lapse in attention, instead satisfied with gazing across the room at a painting of an ocean scene on the opposite wall—far more interesting than her husband-to-be. His heart hammered in his chest as he felt himself coming closer and closer to the inevitable. He was well and truly trapped now.

Chapter 5



The carriage rattled over Vauxhall Bridge beside many others, all making their way toward the grand gardens. Weston had been to Vauxhall a few times over his four Seasons. He always enjoyed the beauty and spectacle of the place. Tonight would be vastly different. He sank back into the plush cushion of the carriage seat, the heaviness in his chest almost crippling.

"Weston, my dear, whatever is the matter?" Mother demanded.

"I am still thinking about our dinner last night with the Cottsriff family," he admitted quietly. He watched his parents from the corner of his eye, hoping to gauge their feelings on the meeting now that a full day had passed.

"As you should." Mother smiled and pressed her hands together, fingers intertwined, over her chest. "It was all rather exciting."

Weston merely nodded, not even able to conjure a false smile.

The baron and baroness glanced at each other with nervous frowns. "And what are your thoughts on it, son?" Father prodded.

Weston swallowed, not expecting them to survey him so directly. "In all honesty, I am not sure that Miss Cottsriff and I will get along very well," he admitted slowly. "She seems a bit stiff and cold to me." That was putting it mildly and politely, but of course Weston would not speak ill of the potential wife his parents had chosen—which brought him to another issue that had been plaguing him. How on Earth had they selected Miss Cottsriff?

"I am sure it was simply first meeting anxiety, darling," Mother cooed with a placating smile. "You know, I must confess that I thought the same thing when I met your father for the first time."

"Weston, I am sure you and Miss Cottsriff will be happy

eventually, just like us," Father added, taking his wife's hand in his and pulling it onto his lap. "Even if you wed without love, your marriage could still blossom into a beautiful partnership. If you are not doing well in the marriage mart on your own, this is often the best way to go. Besides, if you truly cannot stand each other, you will not have to interact much once there is an heir."

His father's words did little to comfort Weston. In fact, they had rather inspired a sick feeling in his stomach that the jostling of the carriage did not help. He looked out the window as other carriages passed by, obscuring his view of the bridge and the Thames.

"Please, Weston, do not be put off so easily." The begging tone in Mother's voice surprised Weston and he looked back at his parents to see them both watching him with worry. "It was not easy for us to secure that meeting in the first place. Not many are willing to send their daughters off on such arrangements these days unless there is some significant advantage. Apparently not even a future barony is considered significant enough now. Miss Cottsriff is, unfortunately, in her late twenties and her poor parents despair of her ever marrying now that she has reached such an age. You would not wish that upon us either, would you?"

Weston had to stop himself from scoffing at this logic. "Mother, I am only two-and-twenty. Many men my age plan to put off marriage for another decade at least. Of course, that is not what I desire, but I do not see why there must be such a rush for me."

Mother and Father exchanged solemn glances that sent a shiver down Weston's spine.

"Son, as much as we hate to say this, your prospects these past nearly four years have been very…underwhelming," Father started, fixing Weston with a firm stare. "If you had been able to sustain even a few courtships for longer than a week before the lady lost interest, we would not fear as we do now—that the longer you wait, the less chance there will be of you finding a wife. Men might not be beholden to the effects of time as women are, but age will eventually affect a bachelor as well. If you wait that long, your choices will be few and far between, and there must be an heir. I know you understand this."

A bitter surge of heat roared through Weston. "Yes, I understand." *I am so undesirable that surely no one will agree to marry me of their own volition*, he finished silently, his jaw pulsing with shame and anger.

Silence filled the carriage until it slowed to a stop before the grand entrance. The silence continued as the Quincy family stepped out among other members of the *ton* as well as the common classes, all here to enjoy a night of whimsy and entertainment—all except Weston, it seemed.

The fantastical elements of Vauxhall Gardens blurred past him as his mind forced him to relive his father's words over and over again. He paid no attention to the high hedges, the towering trees, the pavilions, or the colorful lamps. Nor did he hear the flowing music of the orchestra or the cheerful chatter and laughter of the other visitors. It all blended together into a muddy, bleak background.

Of course Weston had known since he could conceive of such a concept that his primary duty as the future Lord Shawberry was to marry well and produce a son who would one day carry on the family name, title, and wealth. He had simply not expected his own father to paint such a dire picture of his present situation and his future. He had not expected his parents to essentially think of him as a frustrating problem they needed to solve rather than their child they wanted to help. He clenched his teeth as he thought of Louise and how happy Mother and Father were that their youngest child had married and, if the whispers he had heard between Mother and Louise recently were to be believed, already with child. Marrying off a daughter often stressed parents as women had a much shorter window to make a good match. With Louise happily settled, their only remaining issue was Weston.

"Good evening, Lord and Lady Shawberry, Mr. Quincy," a familiar voice called out to them. Weston lifted his head to find the Waynford family and two others standing under a nearby pavilion. Mr. Waynford stepped forward with his usual reserved smile, gesturing for Weston's family to join them.

Weston watched as his parents greeted their friends and made their introductions to Lord and Lady Kentwood, Miss Waynford's aunt and uncle. They were all smiles, as if the conversation in the carriage had been a figment of Weston's imagination. How could they act as if they had not just dealt a severe blow to their son's self-worth? This would be an extremely difficult evening to survive, he realized. Especially with Miss Waynford looking so beautiful in a rich gold gown with silver embroidery, jewels sparkling in her hair under the colored

lamplight.

She beamed at Weston as he approached after offering his own greetings to everyone. While that expression would have once made Weston light with happiness, it now only brought more pain and offered a terrible contrast to the woman he would likely spend the rest of his wretched life with.

“Shall we walk? There is much to see and do and not nearly enough time for it all,” Lady Kentwood cheered, clapping her hands together and casting a dazzling smile about the group.

“The Cascade is nearby and my darling wife has been so eager to see it. Does that sound agreeable to everyone?” Lord Kentwood asked with a loving glance to Miss Waynford’s aunt. The look made Weston’s chest ache. He had only known the viscount and viscountess for mere minutes yet he could already see the deep love they had for each other. Why could everyone else find that but Weston?

Their party abandoned the pavilion and rejoined the gravel walkway toward the Cascade, one of the grandest and most sought-after displays at Vauxhall Gardens. They walked at a leisurely pace, each couple arm in arm, including Weston and Miss Waynford. He peered at her from the corner of his eye when she deliberately slowed down, putting more distance between themselves and their families.

“Tell me, Mr. Quincy, how was your special dinner?” she whispered, eyes aglow with intrigue.

Weston’s already battered heart could not bear the weight of the truth, especially under her excited gaze. “I am…cautiously optimistic,” he offered through a strained smile.

Miss Waynford gave a satisfied nod. “I have absolute faith that it will all unfold exactly as you wish.”

“I hope you are right,” Weston mumbled. He admired Miss Waynford’s endless confidence, misplaced though it was at present.

“Now tell me more about this mysterious lady,” she pried with an almost childlike giggle.

“Well, there is not much to tell yet,” Weston confessed, the starched collar of his shirt suddenly feeling too tight, the sleeves of his black coat too restricting. “She is…shy, I think.”

“You will learn more about her in time, I am sure,” Miss Waynford said, confident and encouraging. “Is she very pretty?”

Weston focused his gaze straight ahead as they approached the

crowd gathered around the majestic Cascade. “Yes, quite.” If he looked at Miss Waynford while answering that question in his already agitated state, he knew he would blurt out something she would not want to hear.

They joined the press of bodies clamoring for a look at the artificial waterfall, trying to get as close as possible before the demonstration started. The wooded area filled with people, forcing Miss Waynford to press herself into Weston’s side. Instinctively, he unlinked their arms and instead wrapped his around her shoulder to offer her some protection from the onlookers pressing into every available space.

She looked from his hand resting on her upper arm up to his face with wide eyes. Weston’s heart raced as he realized their proximity, especially in such a public place. Miss Waynford did not pull away. In fact, she did not look uncomfortable at all—merely surprised and perhaps something else that Weston could not quite place.

A deep rumble sounded through the surrounding woods, inspiring eager whispers to ripple across the crowd. Lady Kentwood looked over her shoulder at them with a grin. “Look, Beth! It’s starting!”

The viscountess bounced on her toes, her youthful energy astounding Weston. Certainly not many ladies of her rank would allow themselves the pleasure of showing their actual excitement. When she lifted a brow as her eyes darted down to Weston’s and Miss Waynford’s rather intimate position, the two yanked themselves apart. He felt his friend go stiff beside him. Instead of scolding them or bringing the issue to Mr. and Mrs. Waynford’s attention, Lady Kentwood only winked and turned around to face the Cascade again.

Even in the dark, Weston could see a very flattering rouge spreading across Miss Waynford’s cheeks. He gently touched her side with his elbow, offering his arm once more. She accepted it with a shy smile and order was returned—at least until the demonstration began.

The massive tin sheets lumbered into movement, slowly at first and then gaining speed as the belts controlling them cranked with more power. The illusion mimicked the beauty of a real waterfall. Fascinated whispers, cheers, and claps surged through the crowd as the Cascade flowed, catching the light from the lamps and shining it back out into the woods.

Almost every eye watched Vauxhall Garden’s most popular

attraction with wonder. Weston contented himself with staring at Miss Waynford instead. Her lips parted in a silent gasp, her gaze flying over the dancing tin sheets—completely oblivious to Weston's attention.

For the first time that evening, Weston felt a true smile working its way onto his face. Even his parents' words in the carriage and the prospect of marrying Miss Cottsriff could not dull his enjoyment of this moment. He loved how genuinely Miss Waynford saw everything in the world, her quiet awe effortlessly capturing Weston's focus.

Everything about her was just so warm and lively and charming in a gentle, beautiful way.

"Incredible!" Miss Waynford cried, slipping her arm out of Weston's so she could offer her applause with the rest of the crowd. Weston glanced around, returning to the present moment.

He had missed the entire thing, though he found that he did not regret it at all. The Cascade would be there later. Miss Waynford, on the other hand, he could not be so sure about. He would rather enjoy these moments with her…these last moments before his life changed forever.

The group resumed their walk through the wooded area, the adults recounting the magic of the man-made waterfall. Miss Waynford clung to Weston's arm once more, yet something felt different.

Weston could feel something rising in him, acidic and miserable. Seeing Miss Waynford's pure joy, feeling her tucked into his side as if she belonged there, had only muddled his mind further.

"I hated that dinner last night," he blurted, his own eyes growing round with surprise. Weston looked down at Miss Waynford to see a similarly perplexed expression on her face. "I am sorry, I should not have said that," he stammered.

"Do not apologize, Mr. Quincy," the young lady insisted gently, resting her other hand on his forearm and giving an encouraging squeeze. "Please, tell me what you hated about it. You can share anything with me, remember?"

Weston shook his head, eyes closing for a moment as he wondered where to begin. Finally, with a weary sigh, he explained his parents' desire for him to accept a woman of their choosing and why—and exactly how he felt about said woman.

"I hate to speak ill of anyone, you know that. But Miss Cottsriff…. If we married, it would be a miserable, lifelong disaster. Even if, as my

father says, we avoid each other after we produce the desired children, I know I will never truly be happy. How can I be when I had hoped to find a love match and instead am forever tied to a woman who can barely stand to look at me?

"Yet I feel I cannot decline because my parents are thrilled with the arrangement. No, to be more precise, they are thrilled to thrust me out of their sphere of worries. Of course I am no fool. I know I have not had any luck on my own. Besides, it is not dissimilar to how they married and they have found happiness with one another. I will not say love, necessarily, but happiness has been enough for them."

The words spilled out of Weston in a surprising rush. When he had first arrived at Vauxhall Gardens, he had been so sure that he would be unable to give voice to the hurtful truths his parents had brought to light and the many disheartening feelings he had experienced since meeting Miss Cottsriff yesterday. Yet in Miss Waynford's presence, with her gentle encouragement, he suddenly felt free to speak his mind. He truly did feel that he could share anything with her, just as she had said, without fear of judgement.

Indeed, Miss Waynford looked just as shocked and dismayed as Weston felt. He had never seen such a look of anger mixed with despair on her face. He could feel her upset on his behalf even in the way her slender fingers grasped at his coat sleeve, dimpling the thick black fabric.

"No one should ever marry someone they do not love—or at the very least get along with. No one should ever be forced to marry at all if they do not wish it," she whispered through pursed lips. Weston's brows rose at her tone. He had also never heard her sound so intimidating—a truly rare feat for such a kindhearted young lady.

Weston could only nod his agreement. There was nothing more for him to say. Just because he thought he should not be forced into this absurd marriage to appease his parents' fears did not mean he could stop it from happening. Deep in the darkest part of his heart, he knew they were right. He had failed to find love on his own and it seemed it would be out of reach forever.

They walked in heavy silence for a few moments, neither of them paying much mind to the magic of the gardens surrounding them. Weston thought that was a shame. He would have liked to see more of Miss Waynford's enjoyment. He almost regretted unloading his burden

on her since it had stolen her interest in the scenery, though he did have to selfishly admit that finally sharing his concerns and knowing that someone else was on his side had lifted his spirits by a fraction.

A thoughtful hum beside Weston drew his attention back to his friend. He looked down to see Miss Waynford gazing straight ahead at an artfully carved bush in the shape of an elephant. Her eyes seemed to stare right through it. She stopped, forcing Weston to stop as well. He glanced nervously at their families who continued on the path, oblivious to Weston and Miss Waynford amidst the beauty of the hedge garden.

Before Weston could ask what was wrong, Miss Waynford pulled away and whirled around to face him. She took his hands in hers, an almost wild look in her eyes.

"Mr. Quincy…perhaps you and I should marry…"

The words came out in a breathless rush, the hollow of her neck pulsing with each rapid inhale and exhale. She looked up at Weston with pure sincerity.

Weston's mind reeled as her suggestion bounced around his skull. He could only stare back, eyes wide and mouth ajar in a very ungentlemanly fashion.

"I am sorry, Miss Waynford…. Did I just hear you correctly?"

~

BETH HAD NEVER SEEN Mr. Quincy's lively eyes so round, so completely shocked and disbelieving. His mouth, usually smiling and laughing, hung open. She would have giggled at the unexpectedly charming expression had her heart not been hammering.

Good heaven, what did I just do? she cried internally, panic swelling in her throat. Was it too late to take it back, to attribute it to an overwhelmed and distraught mind? She certainly was those things on her friend's behalf, yet did that mean she should throw out all her dreams of true love?

They stood before each other for an untold amount of time, both too paralyzed to move or speak, until someone brushed against Beth's back, causing her to stumble into Mr. Quincy's chest. They must have been blocking the walkway. Someone with little patience or manners had decided to force their way around instead of politely coughing to

signal their displeasure at the dumbfounded pair.

Mr. Quincy easily caught Beth in his arms, pulling her into him and stepping back to move them just off the side of the path into the neatly trimmed grass. His fingers spread out along the small of her back, strong and comforting all at once. Her heart went from hammering to floating in a strangely light, almost dizzying sensation.

"Miss Waynford, I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your kind offer, but I am afraid I must decline," he whispered as he released Beth from his grip, his hands trailing down her arms until their fingertips slipped apart. His dejected smile almost broke Beth's heart clean in two.

"But—"

"No, my wonderful friend," Mr. Quincy insisted with surprising firmness. "I know what you really want, and this is not it. I cannot have you throwing away your chance at a happy marriage just for my sake," he chuckled, the sound strangled and pained.

Again, they fell into a leaden silence. Beth could no longer look at him. Instead her gaze fell to the grass, noticing the way the gold of her skirt popped against it. So she really had said that mad thing.

And she had been rejected. Wasn't that for the best? Mr. Quincy had just given her another chance to cling to her goal of finding a love match. Of course she felt awful for her dear friend and wanted to help him in any way possible. Perhaps offering herself in place of that Miss Cottsriff was not the best way to go about it after all.

"We have fallen quite behind," Mr. Quincy said quietly. "We should catch up so we do not lose sight of our parents lest we appear to be unchaperoned. The last thing either of us needs is a damaged reputation, yes?"

When Beth looked up again, Mr. Quincy was smiling with his elbow angled out for her to take. The smile did not reach his eyes. The humor did not lift his voice.

Beth numbly agreed, resting her hand in the crook of his elbow as she had done so many times these past two Seasons without thinking anything of it. A fierce heat started in her chest and crept up her neck as the full weight of embarrassment settled on her. Mr. Quincy started them back on the path, easily catching sight of Aunt Harriet's bright blonde hair and hurrying them forward to close the distance. Beth prayed with all her might that he would not look at her and see just

how mortified she felt.

They soon caught up with the rest of their group. Beth assumed that none of them had noticed their brief separation until Aunt Harriet and Uncle Jonas both sent knowing looks over their shoulders. They certainly suspected something, though they would have been shocked to know the real truth of it.

After just another minute of walking again, Mr. Quincy stopped abruptly. He turned to Beth and took her hands in his, encouraging her to face him as well, his expression grave and earnest.

“I hope you did not misunderstand me earlier. Any gentleman would be blessed to have you for a wife, truly. But you must know that you still have a chance at finding the gentleman who is meant for you, even if you have faced some struggles. There is no need to sacrifice yourself for me.”

He pressed her hands tightly, his voice almost pleading. Before Beth could respond, he linked their arms again and resumed their walk. Silence enveloped them once more despite the free flowing conversation of the garden’s many visitors. Beth considered Mr. Quincy’s words as they walked, a deeply unsettling pit growing in her stomach.

When she was sure her curious aunt and uncle were distracted by a majestic orchestral performance, Beth tugged at Mr. Quincy’s arm to gain his attention. He looked at her with upturned brows, curious and always ready to listen.

“I am so terribly sorry for being so bold earlier,” Beth said, her voice small and ashamed. Truly, what had gotten into her? She had never been one to make rash decisions or life altering declarations.

To her surprise, Mr. Quincy chuckled. This time, a little light had returned to his deep brown eyes. “I truly do appreciate you being so willing to jump to my aid, Miss Waynford. That is one of the many things I so admire about you. You always have such a compassionate heart for others. You are the best kind of friend anyone could wish for.”

A tiny spark of warmth signaled to something deep in Beth’s chest at his words and the sincerity in his voice. She could not let this be the end of it for this wonderful man.

“Please, Mr. Quincy, think about this before agreeing to it just because it is what your parents want. You should not give up hope yet

either.” Her fingers tightened around his arm, desperate to convey her own earnest desire for his happiness.

The gentleman looked straight ahead and nodded, the corner of his mouth pulled up in a small smile. “I promise I will do just that.”

Beth knew him well enough by now to recognize the resignation in his eyes. Her heart sank to a pitiful depth. He was such a good, kind man. Any lady would be lucky to have him as her husband. Her breath caught in her throat as another thought struck her.

Couldn’t that possibly include Beth herself?

Chapter 6



With head held as high and politely proud as she could manage, Beth strode into her grandparents' ballroom just behind Mama and Papa. She always tried her best to exude a friendly confidence at such events even when she became overwhelmed by the crowds or the attention. She never knew who she might meet, after all, and first impressions were everything. It was best to hide the socially anxious parts of herself.

Beth knew that would be a struggle tonight. Her grandparents, Lord and Lady Welsted, had thrown a grand ball in their handsome townhouse that now three generations of their family had danced in. This was their last ball of the Season, signaling the slow winding down of London activity before everyone returned to their country homes. This would be one of her last opportunities for a miraculous, romantic fairytale meeting with her soulmate. That tall order certainly weighed heavily on Beth's mind as her fingers nervously clutched her pale pink skirts and ran over the soft cream embroidery for comfort.

Of course, it did not help when Beth had just learned from one of her suitors during a carriage ride that afternoon that he would be proposing to another lady. She took a deep breath and looked out at the crowd as Mama and Papa wove through clusters of guests. It seemed like everyone was mingling, dancing, and enjoying themselves without a care in the world. Beth shook her head. The white feathers in her hair threatened to come loose. She quickly reached up and settled them, vowing at the same time to let the excitement of the evening lift her spirits.

Lord Pierce had not been the man for her. She had known that for some time now and had suspected that he would offer for someone

else. His confession during their carriage ride had not surprised her, nor did it break her heart. Beth lifted her chin and pasted a smile onto her face. She would not let that dampen her mood any longer.

"My lovely granddaughter, you are absolutely radiant tonight," Grandmama called as her family approached, arms outstretched and eyes gleaming. "I daresay your dance card will be full tonight and you are sure to make many new friends."

Beth gave a shy smile at the baroness' generous compliments and the way her parents looked at her with sweet pride. "You look beautiful as well, Grandmama."

"Good evening, dear Beth." Grandpapa stepped up beside them and kissed Beth's forehead, quiet and warm as always. He leaned down and whispered, "You are always welcome to come hide away in the corner with me if you need a rest from all the excitement."

"Thank you, Grandpapa." Beth grasped his hand for a brief moment with an understanding smile. She, Grandpapa, and Mama all shared similar introverted natures. They often stuck together during such bustling events.

After hugging her parents, Mama turned her attention back to Beth, gently fussing with her hair and fluffing up her sleeves. Papa chuckled at the sight and kissed Mama on the cheek before leaving to fetch refreshments for them all.

"*Bonsoir,*" a familiar voice called and Beth turned to see her Aunt Eloise and Uncle Patrick approaching.

"Brother, I did not think you would make it," Mama said with a hint of relief as she hugged Uncle Patrick and then his wife.

Uncle Patrick chuckled and smiled lovingly at Aunt Eloise. "My dear wife thought it would do me good since I have not attended a social function, even a family one, in almost a month. She surprised me by finishing the notes on a beast of a play I have been working on."

"It is lovely to see you all. We have missed you terribly and needed to see you before you all leave London," Aunt Eloise continued in her almost invisible French accent, patting Uncle Patrick on the chest.

"On that note, we have a family to introduce you to, Beth. I thought it would be a shame if we missed this opportunity before the Season ends." Uncle Patrick turned his attention to her with a thoughtful smile.

“Is that so?” Beth perked up, a flicker of hope stirring.

“This way, *ma chérie*.” Aunt Eloise took Beth’s hand and led her deeper into the room. Beth threw a hesitant smile over her shoulder at her mother and grandparents.

“We know the Chapman family through my connections at the theater,” Uncle Patrick explained as they slipped through the crowd. “They have a son who is a year or two older than you and a daughter in her first Season. They are a kind family. Young Mr. Chapman is quite a scholarly lad and Miss Chapman is a shy but sweet lady.”

Beth nodded appreciatively at her uncle’s preparation. Similar to Mama, Uncle Patrick tended toward the reserved side and his sharp intelligence meant that he understood Beth’s needs very well. Her stomach still flipped with nerves as it always did before meeting someone new, especially someone who she hoped might be the one.

They approached a small group that kept mostly to themselves near a table laden with gleaming platters of delicious food. Uncle Patrick made the introductions. Beth noticed right away that the son was indeed quite handsome. The poor daughter, shrinking behind Mrs. Chapman, seemed almost intimidated by Beth.

“A pleasure to meet you, Miss Waynford. Your uncle has told me much about you,” the younger Mr. Chapman said as he took Beth’s gloved hand and just barely brushed his lips against it. “Would you care to dance the next set?”

“Certainly,” Beth agreed immediately, anticipation humming through her. It must be a good sign that this gentleman already wanted to dance with her after only just meeting. She would have to thank Uncle Patrick later for putting in such a good word for her.

While they waited for their turn, Beth and Mr. Chapman exchanged the usual pleasantries about the luxurious room, the generous number of guests, and the excellent food and drink provided by her grandparents. She found the young man to be very charming and well spoken. She thought nothing could distract her from this new potential suitor until a familiar flash of red caught the corner of her eye.

As subtly as possible, Beth glanced to her left to see Mr. Quincy by the adjacent wall, chatting with a group of his friends. Something in her flipped. She had not known that he would be here tonight as they had not had an opportunity to meet since Vauxhall Gardens. Beth’s

desire to hear more about Mr. Chapman's most recent philosophical readings instantly vanished.

Now that she knew Mr. Quincy was here, she only wanted to see if she could gauge his mood from this distance. Was that a genuine smile? Did that mean he had successfully thwarted his parents' attempt to marry him off to a woman he could hardly stand? What did that thoughtful expression mean? Was he simply reacting to something his friend said or did he have heavier matters on his mind? Beth wanted to know it all.

"Miss Waynford?"

She jumped at the sound of her name and realized that Mr. Chapman was looking at her with a puzzled expression, his hand held out for her.

"My apologies," she mumbled with an embarrassed smile. "I sometimes find myself overwhelmed in such large crowds." It was a weak excuse, and not one she usually confessed so early in an acquaintanceship, yet of course she could not tell him that her attention had been entirely commandeered by another man.

"Do you not wish to dance then?" Mr. Chapman asked, mouth twitching down in disappointment.

"Of course not! I mean, of course I do want to dance," Beth hurried, accepting his hand and marching them toward the dance floor. Now was not the time to worry about Mr. Quincy. She owed her dance partner at least that much. She would just have to try to catch her friend later and see how he fared.

Beth and Mr. Chapman joined the lines of couples on the floor as the music started again. They came together, one of his hands on her waist while the other loosely held her fingers. He gave her a forgiving smile and resumed their earlier conversation about the German transcendental idealist Immanuel Kant.

Yet again, despite Beth's desire to listen to Mr. Chapman's thoughtful insights on a very fascinating topic, she was distracted by Mr. Quincy's presence. He, too, had joined the set, dancing with a young lady wearing such a severe expression that she could only be Miss Cottsriff. Mr. Quincy looked entirely miserable, barely able to muster a ghost of a smile, nor did he try to converse with the other ladies when the dance had them switch partners.

After several long minutes of swapping and returning to her

original partner, Beth finally ended up with Mr. Quincy. This part of the dance moved quickly. She only had seconds with him before she would be spun back to Mr. Chapman. It was enough to see the dull despair in his dark eyes.

"Is that her?" she asked quickly. Mr. Quincy only nodded in response before handing her back to Mr. Chapman and taking Miss Cottsriff in his arms once more.

Beth spent the rest of the dance trapped in a battle between being attentive to her partner and stealing worried glances over at her friend. When the dance came to an end and Mr. Chapman led her off the dance floor, Beth realized with a guilty twinge that at some point the young man had stopped trying to converse with her, no doubt noticing her distraction.

"Thank you for the lovely dance, Mr. Chapman," she offered, praying that he would hear her sincerity and not take her inattentiveness to heart. The gentleman gave a polite bow and mumbled something about checking on his sister before striding away.

Beth bit her lip and let her gaze drop to the polished dark wood floor. She so hated to make others upset. She also hated to see others upset when that was the last thing they deserved. Beth forced her head back up and she peered around the crowded room until she spotted Miss Cottsriff walking toward a far wall where her family likely waited. Mr. Quincy headed in the opposite direction toward Lord and Lady Shawberry. Beth could see their eager smiles even from here. It made her stomach hollow to know that they cared so little for their son's true happiness that they would force him onto this dismal path while pretending to act in his best interests.

Moving with surprising speed given the thick gathering of guests, Beth wove her way toward Miss Cottsriff. Her anger at the situation propelled her forward with ease, as did her hope that perhaps something could still be done for Mr. Quincy. She wanted to take measure of Miss Cottsriff for herself. In an uncommonly bold move, Beth's hand shot out and grasped the other woman's elbow. Miss Cottsriff whirled around in shock, icy eyes flashing with irritation.

"What is the meaning of this? Who are you?" she demanded in a sharp, grating voice, yanking her arm out of Beth's hand.

Beth's courage faltered only slightly. She was certainly not one for confrontation, but she had to do this for Mr. Quincy's sake. "Good

evening, Miss Cottsriff. I am Elizabeth Waynford, a close friend of Mr. Quincy's. I hoped to congratulate you on your happy future and perhaps get to know you better."

The young lady eyed Beth up and down, her upper lip curled in distaste. "Very well," she grumbled, tossing her head back. She looked down her nose at Beth, an easy feat given her height advantage.

"Would you care for a drink?" Beth asked, gesturing toward a nearby footman.

Without answering, Miss Cottsriff strode away toward the servant and grabbed a glass. Beth did the same, her hopes already dwindling down to almost nothing. She had prayed that perhaps Miss Cottsriff would not be as bad as she sounded, or that perhaps she simply needed some time to warm up to Mr. Quincy and this unexpected situation. Her attitude thus far was not promising.

Beth took an unusually hefty swig of her punch to give herself something to do while she gathered her suddenly overwhelmed thoughts. This certainly had not gone how she'd hoped. Miss Cottsriff sipped daintily, her narrowed eyes sweeping around the room, judging everything and everyone.

"Congratulations once again on your impending engagement," Beth finally managed to stammer.

Miss Cottsriff lifted a nonchalant shoulder. "Thank you, I suppose."

Clinging to her last bits of optimism, Beth pushed again, hoping that she could uncover something good about this woman so she could ease her friend's mind about their marriage.

"I can assure you that you have found a great man. Mr. Quincy will make you very happy."

The truth of Beth's own words filled her chest with a melancholy warmth, such an odd juxtaposition that it caught her off guard. She knew without a doubt that Mr. Quincy would make any lady happy if given a proper chance. The thought of his generous heart going to waste made her ache.

Beth's mouth nearly fell open when Miss Cottsriff scoffed. "If he is so great then he would have been married by now. There must be a reason why no lady has shown actual interest in him. I have my own reasons for seeking such an arrangement that I am not obligated to explain to you, but it is not my fault I haven't met any men who live up to my standards."

Pain lanced through Beth as Miss Cottsriff's words slammed into her. Some small part of her did pity the lady for her situation. Being forced to make her own way in the world was never an easy task for a woman. Yet Beth could not believe that anyone could have such a low opinion of other people in general. She found it hard to believe that literally every man Miss Cottsriff had met had had some horrible defect that rendered him completely unsuitable—including Mr. Quincy. Beth knew with certainty now that Miss Cottsriff was the real problem.

"Once you come to know Mr. Quincy better you will see that he is so very wonderful," Beth said with a bite in her voice that surprised them both.

The heat of outrage simmered inside her, pushing her previously unchallenged boundaries of politeness. She had never encountered someone so caustic. Even kind, gentle Beth was losing her patience.

Miss Cottsriff shook her head with a sneer. "Mr. Quincy is boring and his future title is hardly something to look forward to. But at least if I marry him, I know I will be able to do whatever I want with my time and money. He does not seem like he will put up a fight."

Beth stared at the other woman for a long, silent moment, her anger building to a seething tidal wave beyond anything she had ever before experienced. She could feel bitter words rising up her throat like bile and found that she did not want to stop them.

"You are a truly horrid woman, Miss Cottsriff."

She did not give Miss Cottsriff a chance to respond. She whirled around and stormed away, heart thudding in her chest as she realized what she had just done. A satisfied smile twitched at the corner of Beth's mouth. She could not bring herself to care about the consequences.

Beth raced through the room, eyes searching for that familiar jolt of bright red hair. Panic made her clumsy in her rush to find Mr. Quincy. She nearly bumped into numerous guests on her way and completely ignored Aunt Eloise when she called out to ask Beth how her dance with the new gentleman had gone. Had Mr. Quincy left already? Beth needed to tell him what she had discovered about his potential bride-to-be before he officially proposed.

Then, finally, a wave of relief washed over her when she spotted him in a corner surrounded by a group of his friends. He had been

blocked from view by a very tall gentleman. Beth wasted no time, marching forward and ignoring curious looks from the other men. She grasped Mr. Quincy's hand and dragged him away.

"Miss Waynford, what—"

"I cannot stand Miss Cottsriff," Beth blurted, rounding on Mr. Quincy and fixing him with a strong stare. Her chest still rose and fell rapidly with the energy fueled by injustice coursing through her. She knew she must look half mad. She did not care. She would not let this horrible thing happen to Mr. Quincy.

The young man blanched and he tugged at the stiff collar of his shirt. "I did notice the two of you talking earlier. I will admit that I do not care for her either," he admitted, disheartened. "I know she thinks I am a sorry excuse for a man and in truth I do not blame her. After all, I have resorted to this just for the sake of getting married to please my parents."

His head hung low in shame. Several strands of copper hair came loose to sweep across his forehead. Beth suppressed the wild urge to reach up and brush them back. She could not, however, suppress the heartbreak she felt on behalf of her friend now that she really knew who he would be forced to spend his life with.

Beth tore her eyes away from Mr. Quincy to look out at the massive room full of couples at all stages of their relationships as well as many eligible bachelors and young ladies hunting for matches. She had been one of them just moments ago. She returned her attention to Mr. Quincy.

In him she saw a good, honorable, kind man—someone she had been happy to become friends with, to spend time with, someone she could relate to and understand and receive the same in return. A spark of courage flickered inside her.

"Miss Waynford? Is something wrong?" Mr. Quincy's question brought Beth back to the present moment, to the truth.

Even in the face of his own woes, he only cared about Beth. That, she knew now, was invaluable. It was worth everything. She might not have found the love she'd envisioned, but she felt with certainty in her soul that a marriage to Mr. Quincy would be a wonderful companionship. Perhaps, in time, love would grow. For now, she needed to step up and rescue her dear friend.

Her stomach erupted in flutters, her pulse buzzing in her ears as

she took Mr. Quincy's hand and led him toward a quiet corner. She turned to face him, the gravity of the situation providing her an unexpected strength. With his hands in hers, Beth looked into Mr. Quincy's confused eyes—eyes that she wanted to see alight with joy and laughter.

"Mr. Quincy…Weston…. Marry me instead."

He reeled back in surprise, trying to pull his hands away. Beth held firm. She would not let him run from this perfect, convenient solution that would save him a lifetime of misery.

"Dear Miss Waynford, this is absurd." He squeezed his eyes shut, unable to look at the pleading expression on Beth's face, perhaps even praying that this was all a bizarre dream.

"I will not allow you to marry that awful creature," Beth insisted, sharp and bold. "Weston, you know that we will get along as husband and wife because we already get along so well as friends. With that as our foundation, we can figure out the rest."

Weston's eyes snapped open and he stared at Beth for a profound moment, searching her for something. "And what of your prospects? Are you going to throw them all away on a fool? You are only in your second Season, Miss Waynford. Though you might not like to admit it, you still have plenty of time to—"

"None of the men I have met thus far have been as kind or understanding as you. None of them have been as humorous or thoughtful or attentive as you. I have not felt as comfortable with any of them as I do with you. You are the best of any of them."

The words poured out of her in a rush, suddenly desperate to emerge and bridge the gap between them. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Beth wondered if those things actually did constitute love.

"Miss Waynford, this is far too much, far more than any friend should do," he countered with a weak smile.

"I do not see it that way, Weston. This is what I *want.* Please, trust me."

Weston—such a lovely, charming name that felt perfect on Beth's lips—looked down at their still joined hands. Emotions and decisions battled across his face. Finally, his expression settled on a resigned guilt. His eyes trailed up to Beth's, searching her again.

"Only if you are truly, positively, completely sure…"

Another wave of boldness overcame Beth. She let her hands slide

up Weston's arms as she stepped closer, bringing them almost nose to nose.

"I am truly, positively, completely sure. This is the right choice. If anyone can make this work, it is us."

The tension in Weston's shoulders melted slightly. Though Beth could still see his internal struggle, he gave a small nod.

"Then in that case, will you marry me, Elizabeth?" he whispered, his breath touching her forehead.

Beth smiled. She had so longed to hear that question all her life. It sounded just as incredible as she'd always hoped.

"It would be my honor. But please, call me Beth."

Even Weston smiled now. "Beth. A beautiful name. I could certainly get used to it."

Chapter 7



Memories of last night's ball still swirled in Weston's mind as he stood before the door of Father's study. He did not know why he should feel so nervous to make an announcement that would solve their problems and ease their worries. He had even decided to wait until morning to tell them just to be sure he had not dreamt it all. With a steadying breath, Weston knocked on the door.

"Enter," the baron called.

Weston swallowed and did as he was bid. "Good morning, Father." He offered a stiff nod to the older man.

"Ah, Weston, how did you enjoy the ball last night?" Father asked, briefly glancing up from the letter in his hand.

"I had a lovely time," he mumbled, fidgeting with his coat sleeves and shifting his weight from one foot to the other and back again.

"Excellent." Father returned his attention to the letter, setting it aside and pulling out a fresh sheet of paper and a pen to draft his response. Luckily, Mother appeared at the door a moment later, saving Weston from devolving into a fit of nerves the longer he waited.

"Good morning, my lady. What brings you this way?" Father asked with a slightly furrowed brow. The baroness rarely had any reason to visit her husband in his private study.

"A maid told me that Weston requested that I meet him here." She eyed her son, curious and confused.

Weston stood straighter. The time had come. "Yes well, Mother, Father, I have…news."

The sound of wood scraping against wood startled Weston. He turned away from Mother, still standing in the doorway, to see that Father had risen from his desk. The baron hurried across the room and

stood beside his wife, clasping her hand. They exchanged excited glances.

Weston gave an intrigued huff. He could see that they did love each other now, at least to some degree. While he could not say if they were in love, he knew that they had developed their own type of love that worked for them. Could he hope for the same for himself and Beth?

“Please, son, this anticipation is going to send me into a dizzy spell. Is this about Miss Cottsriff?” Mama pressed, her face already split into a grin.

“Partially, yes,” Weston admitted with an awkward smile. He did not like to get their hopes up only to disappoint them. He had done enough of that already. “As a matter of fact, I have decided not to pursue Miss Cottsriff further. Our personalities simply do not agree with each other, but—”

“Weston, do you not think it too soon to make such a judgement? She is simply reserved and will come around to you over time,” Father interrupted, a vein bulging at his temple.

Without thinking, Weston gritted his teeth and hissed, “I do not want someone who may or may not come around to me eventually.”

“Weston!” Mother gasped, hand flying to her mouth. Her son had never been one to argue. She had told Weston time and again that even as a little boy, he had always been so delightfully agreeable, never throwing fits when his toys were put away or when it was time for history lessons with the governess.

Weston bit his lip and regained his composure, pulling his shoulders back in an attempt at confidence. “I was trying to inform you that I instead proposed to Miss Waynford last night.”

Their eyes widened. They stared at Weston, clearly waiting for something. With an embarrassed blush, Weston added, “She accepted.”

The room burst into cheers as Weston’s parents rushed him, Mother throwing her arms around him while Father slammed his hand against his back.

“Congratulations, my dear boy!” Mother cried, tears brimming in her eyes. She planted several wet kisses on Weston’s cheek. When she pulled back, she grasped Weston’s face in her hands and looked at him as if he would be marrying into the royal family. “I am so thrilled that

both my children will be happily settled, and just a year apart no less. And grandchildren to come!"

"You did well, Weston," Father added with a proud smile. "I cannot tell you how relieved we are to have this resolved."

Guilt stung at Weston as he tried his best to smile and laugh along with his parents. He had caused this happiness and excitement under false pretenses. He found it difficult to think of it as resolved when uncertainty had plagued his mind all night.

"If you do not mind, I would like to go call on the Waynfords," he managed to call over the commotion.

"Of course, of course. Do tell them that I will be hosting a dinner here for them to celebrate your engagement." Mama practically pushed Weston out of the study, mumbling something about needing to start on the menu right away.

Weston took the barouche through London to the Waynfords' townhouse. That horrible guilt grew stronger with every passing minute, settling so heavily in the pit of his stomach that he thought he might crush the carriage with the weight of it. He desperately needed to see Beth.

He bounded up the front steps and knocked forcefully, nearly falling into their foyer when a footman opened the door. "I am here to see Miss Waynford."

The butler appeared promptly with a regretful frown. "Unfortunately, Mrs. Waynford and Miss Waynford are out and it is uncertain when they will return."

Weston internally cursed his poor timing. For half a second he considered turning back until the guilt roared up once more. "I will wait for her then."

"Very good, right this way." The butler started up the main staircase, leading Weston to the drawing room. The door was already open and Weston could hear Mr. Waynford's deep voice engaged in a dramatic reading of some adventure tale with soft pianoforte music in the background.

When the butler strode in and announced Weston, everyone looked up in happy surprise. Mr. Waynford's hand paused over a page in a book while his son, Master Robert, clung to his arm. Miss Sophia looked over her shoulder at Weston from the pianoforte with raised brows.

“Good afternoon,” he started, hoping that he sounded perfectly normal.

“Mr. Quincy!” Master Robert cheered, shooting up from the sofa and racing across the room with a grin on his young face. “Can I call you Weston since you will be my brother soon? You can call me Rob, everyone does.”

“That would be an honor, Rob.” Weston gave the boy an experimental pat on the shoulder. Rob beamed up at him in return.

Miss Sophia and Mr. Waynford approached more slowly, the former with an almost proud smile and the latter with a thoughtful gaze. Weston chewed on the inside of his cheek, praying that Beth’s father wouldn’t somehow read his mind about the truth of their engagement. They had agreed last night to keep the arrangement a secret from their families for now, instead preferring to let everyone think that they had fallen deeply in love.

While Weston knew his parents would not particularly care either way, Beth suspected that her family would not be as thrilled no matter how much she told them that she had chosen this of her own free will. Even Weston was not so sure how thrilled he was now that he had had a sleepless night to reconsider the situation.

“Congratulations, Mr. Quincy.” The older man stepped forward, gently maneuvering his son out of the way, and gave Weston a firm handshake. “We cannot tell you how happy we were to hear the news.” Despite his usual distant expression, Mr. Waynford’s voice was warm and welcoming.

“I am so glad that Beth finally came to her senses and realized that the right gentleman had been under her nose the whole time,” Miss Sophia added with a glint in her hazel eyes. “I swear I have never seen my sister smile so much as when she is with you or talking about you.”

Weston gave a hesitant laugh. Miss Sophia’s words had struck a chord in him. She sounded perfectly sincere, setting him at ease by a fraction. Could it truly be possible that Beth already had feelings for him that she had not yet realized? It seemed a strange thing to wonder considering they were now engaged.

“Thank you all. Of course I am so very happy to be joining your family soon and I consider myself to be blessed beyond measure. Beth is a treasure and I promise to do right by her every day for the rest of

our lives," Weston offered with all the truth in his heart. Regardless of the presence of love, Weston knew he would do everything in his power to make Beth's life as happy as possible.

Mr. Waynford's stoic face softened. A hint of a smile comforted Weston. Beth's observant father seemed to believe him. Why shouldn't he? Weston had only spoken the truth, though parts of the truth remained hidden.

"Come join me and Papa on the sofa. He is reading an exciting tale and believe it or not, Papa is excellent at doing character voices." Without waiting for an answer, Master Robert grasped Weston's wrist and pulled him along behind him.

"Rob, at least wait to see if Weston wants to listen to a story right now," Mr. Waynford scolded gently, sending an apologetic smile to Weston.

The boy paused and looked at Weston with a contrite frown. "I am sorry, I sometimes get ahead of myself. Would you like to join us?"

"Nothing would delight me more," Weston chuckled. Rob lit up and hopped onto the sofa, wiggling deep into the soft blue upholstery. Mr. Waynford resumed his spot by the armrest and Weston sat on his future brother-in-law's other side.

"Does our new family member have any special requests?" Miss Sophia asked from the pianoforte, fingers already poised over the keys.

"Whatever you like is fine by me." Weston smiled, feeling more at home by the second. Weston had always liked the Waynfords though he had never spent any time with them without Beth. He easily slipped into their gentle, loving dynamic, allowing himself to forget his worries for a moment. These kind people—people who accepted him for who he was—would soon be his family.

Mr. Waynford resumed the adventure story and he did indeed perform the characters admirably, which surprised Weston given he had only ever seen the man's reserved nature. Energetic Rob buzzed in his seat, gasping in awe and clapping in triumph at all the right moments. All the while, Miss Sophia played beautiful melodies, sometimes adjusting the song to suit the mood of the story. Yes, Weston could very well grow used to this environment. He hoped his own future family would be more like this than the one he had come from.

“Goodness, what a lovely gathering we have here.” Mrs. Waynford’s soft laugh by the doorway caught their attention.

Just behind her stood Beth, her dark curls slightly windswept from the breeze and her cheeks tinged pink from the sunlight. She waved when she saw Weston. Instead of comforting him, the sight of his betrothed only caused the guilt to flood back to the forefront of his mind.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Waynford, Beth. I hope you do not mind me waiting here for you,” Weston said as he stood from the sofa and crossed the room to greet them properly.

“Of course not, dear. You are welcome anytime.” Mrs. Waynford held her hands out for Weston. When he took them, she pulled him into a warm hug. “We are so very happy for you and Beth.”

Somehow, her smile managed to make Weston feel even worse. If she ever learned the truth, she would be so terribly disappointed. She might even come to hate Weston for stealing her daughter’s real chance at love. The thought of a woman like Mrs. Waynford hating him made Weston’s stomach clench in shame.

“Come everyone, I am sure our bride and groom would like to discuss their plans,” she called, waving her arms to usher the other Waynfords from the room.

Weston watched them go with panic rising in his throat. He had come here with a mission, yet now that the time had come, he found his courage waning. Mrs. Waynford was the last to exit, leaving the door open a crack to maintain propriety while allowing the couple some privacy.

“My family is just a bit excited if you could not tell,” Beth giggled, clutching her hands before her pretty blue silk skirts. Her laugh only brought Weston a small measure of comfort.

“My parents reacted much the same when I told them this morning. It will not be long before I receive a letter from my sister with one line of congratulations and all the rest detailing her advice on marriage and how to be a good husband,” Weston said with a dry laugh.

“Shall we sit? Mama and I have been out walking around the shops all morning.”

“Of course. Did you find any treasures to bring home?” Weston took Beth’s hand and led them to the now empty sofa.

“I did, yes,” Beth said with a shy yet excited smile. “Some accessories to compliment my wedding dress.”

Weston raised a brow. “Already? Even with a sister married, I had no idea women moved so quickly with wedding planning. You even have a dress?”

Beth’s bright laughter filled the room, her smile tugging at Weston’s heart. “Not the dress itself, no, but Mama and I visited my grandparents to tell them the good news this morning since they were so busy hosting the ball last night that we did not have a chance to tell them then. They offered to have a new gown made for me as one of their wedding gifts. I already know how I want it to look so it was easy to find pieces to match it. I must say, being engaged is quite nice.”

Once Weston’s surprise subsided, the reality of his visit came crashing down around him once more. He took a few deep breaths, scooted closer to Beth, and took her hands. “You see, that is just the thing I wanted to discuss.”

Beth stiffened, her soft mouth frowning with worry.

“I know I have just given my parents the surprise of a lifetime, and your family is clearly thrilled as well, but I must tell you again that you do not have to go through with this if you do not want to. I mean that in all seriousness, Beth.”

It was Weston’s turn to grow rigid when Beth’s thumbs absentmindedly began stroking the backs of his hands, so sweet and comforting as was her nature. She looked down at the rug, her eyes tracing the intricate woven pattern.

“Weston, I cannot let you marry that woman.”

“I threw off Miss Cottsriff already and I doubt she would take me back after that. Besides, I am sure my parents will find another lady for me. They did find her, after all.”

Beth’s head snapped up and she gave Weston a firm, determined look. His muddled heart leapt at the endearing expression. “I am not sure I trust your parents’ judgement if their first choice was Miss Cottsriff.”

Laughter burst from Weston, momentarily dispelling the tension that had been coiled inside him all day. Beth was sharp-witted indeed under her normally sweet demeanor—and he certainly saw her point.

Beth chuckled as well, her eyes softening. She looked down at their

hands and continued to brush her thumbs over Weston's. He realized with a tingle down his spine that she was doing it intentionally now.

"I assure you, Weston, that this is my choice." She looked straight into his eyes as she spoke with an admirable steel. Then Weston saw a flash of something he had not expected. Longing?

Beth pulled away, folding her hands in her lap. She lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug. "Besides, this is practical for us both. You are not forced into a terrible marriage and I will still achieve my belated dream of marrying. There is simply too much risk in waiting year after year. I could not bear the potential failure of a third Season."

Her words still stung even though Weston knew this was part of her mindset when coming into this agreement. "You know your own parents waited several Seasons before meeting and falling in love. That could very well still happen for you, but it cannot if you marry me. I am stealing that option from you."

A muscle in Beth's jaw twitched. "You are not stealing anything from me, Weston. I am choosing this just as much as you are and I have made peace with my reasons. Besides," she added, her voice dropping to a shy whisper, "I truly have not met any other man these past two years whom I have gotten along with so well."

Weston nodded, though he was still not entirely sure that he agreed with Beth's reasoning. Couldn't a mutual affection be enough to sustain a happy marriage? His hands now empty, Weston fiddled with a thread poking out of the sofa's upholstery. Though he knew now that he would have to accept Beth's decision, his guilt still simmered below the surface. Yet what else could he do if she had already made up her mind? With a small smile, Weston realized that he had never seen this stubborn streak in his friend before.

"As you know, I feel the same about you," he admitted, painfully aware of how odd it was that he should be embarrassed to say such things to his future wife.

He opened his mouth to continue, to tell Beth just how much she meant to him, how much he appreciated and adored her. His words remained unsaid when he saw the way Beth chewed on her bottom lip, clearly flustered. The last thing Weston wanted to do, no matter how desperately he wanted Beth to understand his heart, was make her any more uncomfortable.

He did dare to reach out once more and hold her hand. “Promise me one thing, Beth.”

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. Without hesitating, she said, “Anything.”

“Please promise me right away if you change your mind at any point while the banns are read. I will completely understand and freely release you from any obligations.”

Though Weston knew it was the right thing to do, the thing he had been waiting to say all afternoon, the words settled in his stomach with a profound weight. He knew he needed to ensure that Beth could still escape with her freedom if she wanted to. The banns would be read in both of their home parishes for three weeks. That was plenty of time for Beth to reconsider and choose a different path. Weston needed to give at least that much to her. Yet after knowing for less than twenty-four hours that the woman he had grown so fond of this Season would soon be his wife, the thought of her rejecting him after all ached more deeply than he had expected.

With a sigh, Beth nodded. “I promise, Weston. But only if you promise to do the same.”

“It is a deal then,” Weston said with a rueful chuckle, already knowing deep in his heart that he would never change his mind.

Chapter 8



The elegant cream wedding dress with delicate silver embroidery and touches of lace came to life in the floor length mirror as Beth stood before it. She looked from her reflection down to her body in the real world, still stunned that this day she had dreamed of all her life was just around the corner. Her heart buzzed with a heavy mixture of excitement and anxiety, her fingers twisting into the luxurious silk fabric. Even in all her daydreams, she had not expected to wear such a beautiful gown on her wedding day. Grandmama and Grandpapa had generously gifted her with a brand new dress made by the local seamstress in the small town of Shambrook in Essex where the Waynfords lived. Today, the seamstress would be making the final alterations. The next time Beth wore this dress, it would be the morning of her wedding.

"Please keep still, miss. And do not bunch up the fabric like that," the seamstress grumbled, swatting Beth's hands away so she could place more pins in the bodice.

Mama smiled lovingly at her daughter from her chair next to the mirror. "She is just a bit nervous for her big day, that is all."

Beth smiled sheepishly at both ladies. Her mother was correct, though not for the reasons she assumed. After all, Beth was agreeing to spend her life with someone she was not really sure was her true love. Somehow, the idea that Weston was not her perfect match pinched at something in Beth's heart. She did very much like Weston, there could be no doubt about that. Her brow knit together as she sensed that she was resisting something, though her mind was so overwhelmed these days that she could not figure out what.

She looked into the mirror again, a picture perfect bride. She

would look even more lovely when her hair had been properly styled and adorned with the beautiful pearl headpiece she had purchased the morning after their engagement. In just a few days, she would be a wife. Weston's family would be arriving tomorrow. The day after, they would marry at the quaint church near Shambrook Lodge, Beth's childhood home. Though it had been three weeks since Beth had essentially proposed to Weston, everything seemed to be happening so quickly now.

The seamstress took Beth by the shoulders and spun her around, dragging her back to reality. The old woman eyed her up and down, the wrinkles in her forehead deepening before a cheery smile spread across her face.

"There, that should be all. You look marvelous, miss." The seamstress nodded her approval at her own statement and clapped. Beth shrank under the praise, her shoulders inching up towards her ears.

With the help of her mother and the seamstress, Beth slipped out of the beautiful gown and back into her normal walking dress. The two Waynsford women said their farewells and started the long walk through the village and up the path toward Shambrook Lodge, arm in arm. Beth would have been happy to make the whole journey in silence until she heard her mother sniffle.

"Mama, whatever is the matter?" Beth demanded.

Mama gave a trembling smile, hastily wiping away her tears. "You looked so beautiful in there. I always knew this day would come, though no amount of preparation could truly ready me for the moment when my oldest child marries and starts her new life."

"Thank you, Mama," Beth mumbled weakly. Her eyes dropped to the gravel path before them, too flustered to witness the falsely bought happiness on her mother's face.

"I know you will be a wonderful wife, my dearest Beth. And Weston will be a wonderful husband. You will have such a joyful life together," Mama continued, voice catching in her throat.

Beth could tell she was in a rare talkative mood, brought on by the high emotions of such a special time. To her immense shock, Beth felt the truth rising up, pushing against her, desperate to be confessed. She did not know what was worse—her mother's happiness born under false pretenses or trying to bear this secret alone for the rest of her

life.

"Mama…"

The other woman turned to look at her daughter with such a warm and caring smile and joy filled eyes that it finally shattered the last of Beth's resolve.

"Mama, Weston and I are not actually in love. His parents wanted to shackle him to a horrible lady who looked down on him and only wanted to take advantage of him. I could not allow that to happen to my dearest friend, so I offered to marry him instead."

The words spilled out in a breathless jumble, and Beth wondered if any of it had made any sense at all. She continued staring at the gravel for a long moment, awaiting her mother's response. When her confession was met with silence, Beth finally plucked up the courage to look over at Mama. She stared straight ahead at Shambrook Lodge in the distance, her face completely blank. Beth's heart stopped. Had she just made a terrible mistake?

"Mama?" she asked tentatively.

Mama's steps slowed until they came to a stop in the middle of the path. She slipped her arm out of Beth's and turned to face her, staring with impossibly wide eyes. Beth opened her mouth to say something, though she did not know what, when Mama leaned forward and grabbed Beth's arms with a surprisingly fierce grip.

"Beth, we still have time to stop this," she said in a panicked whisper, though the path was empty save for them.

"Mama, I am sorry—"

"Why? Why would you not tell me about this, Elizabeth?" The pleading tone in her voice shot right through Beth. "If you had told me, we could have figured something out together to save you from this. This is not a decision to be taken lightly."

Shame flamed through Beth's chest. She had never seen her mother so distraught except perhaps for the time years ago when Sophie had taken to her bed in a feverish state for almost a month. Beth hated the thought of causing her beloved mama such pain. She truly had gone about this in the completely wrong way.

Unbidden, a memory of Weston's charming half-smile floated into Beth's mind. She pulled her shoulders back and lifted her chin, looking straight into Mama's eyes. "I gave my word, and I will not let my friend down."

In the silence that followed, more memories of Weston flooded Beth's mind—his caring words and understanding eyes, the way he listened to her without fail and always offered his support. She inhaled deeply. She had found her strength, the foundation she had chosen to build this agreement on.

"I know you are worried for me, Mama, but I have made up my mind," she said firmly. When Mama opened her mouth to argue, Beth quickly continued. "I will admit that I am nervous as well. Of course I have thought about all the possibilities that I could be missing out on in these past three weeks. But I would rather marry a man who I know without a doubt is good and kindhearted and will treat me right than settle for someone I barely like when I have no choice."

Mama squeezed her eyes shut and pressed a hand over her mouth, taking a few steps forward to put some distance between them. That seemed to be the exact opposite of what she wanted to hear, yet it was the truth. Beth knew that she would stand by it no matter what anyone else said now.

Beth reeled back when Mama spun around with surprising passion, so unlike her usual gentle nature. "My daughter, you are thinking about this too simplistically. You have only been through two Seasons. I know you have always dreamt of marrying as quickly as possible, but there are so many more opportunities if you would only accept that you need time to find them," she cried, her voice rising slightly in pitch though not in volume.

"If there is anything I am sure of, it is Weston. Even if I do not feel love now, I know that he will make me happy." Beth fixed her mother with a firm gaze, refusing to back down. Any hesitance she had felt over the past few weeks had all but melted away in these last few minutes.

Mama let out a long slow sigh. She walked back to Beth until they were standing almost toe to toe. She took Beth's face in her hands then let them drop to her shoulders. "Are you sure about this, Beth? Is there nothing I can do to convince you to reconsider or at least delay the wedding?" she asked, her eyes full of sadness, the slight wrinkles at the corners suddenly more prominent than Beth had ever noticed.

With as much of an encouraging smile as Beth could muster, she nodded, placing her hands atop Mama's. She pictured Weston, her future husband, in her mind's eye. "Yes, my dear mama. I am sure."

Mama gave a melancholy smile. “I suppose you are an adult now, after all. As shocked and distressed as I am by this news, I can see that you are set on this course. And what I said before remains true. I hold Weston in high esteem and I have no doubt that he will take care of you as any mother would desire for her daughter. You know I am always praying for your health and happiness, Beth.”

Tears pricked the corners of Beth’s eyes and her heart swelled with love and admiration for her mother. She knew she had gone about this in the complete opposite way as Mama had, yet after voicing her concerns, she still accepted Beth’s decision and loved her all the same.

“Oh, come here,” Beth cried. She threw her arms around Mama, fully aware that she was almost squeezing the poor woman to death. Uncertain laughter trickled from the older woman as she returned the embrace, one hand on the nape of Beth’s neck, just as she used to do when Beth was a little girl.

Mama was the first to pull back, her expression serious once more. “You will write to me immediately if you encounter any troubles, yes? You know no matter what, we will do everything in our power for you.”

“Of course, Mama.” Beth kissed Mama on the cheek and then hooked their arms together again. “We should hurry home now. There is still much to prepare…and I have a feeling that Papa will not take as kindly to this information as you did.” Beth shuddered at that thought. It had not crossed her mind until just now that if she revealed the truth to her mother, she would have to reveal it to her father as well.

They resumed their walk at a relaxed pace. “I am not sure I would say that I took kindly to the information. I rather lost my temper for a moment,” Mama said with an embarrassed chuckle. It was true that she rarely rose to anger, even when little Rob was being intentionally frustrating.

Beth let her head rest against Mama’s. “Still, I think you did better than many other mothers would, and I thank you for that.”

“You had best leave your father to me,” Mama added after a moment of silent contemplation.

“Gladly,” Beth mumbled. She had enough to worry about with the final wedding preparations, after all.

The fruits of her labors appeared before her eyes just two days later. Her breath came in shallow huffs as she stood outside the small

church's double doors on Papa's arm. She clutched his coat sleeve with trembling fingers, only vaguely aware that she should be gentler since this was Papa's best coat that he only wore on the most special of occasions. Unfortunately for Papa's coat, Beth's nerves rendered her unable to loosen her grip.

"You are so beautiful, my dear," Papa whispered, leaning down so his cheek rested against her temple. "Take a few deep breaths to calm yourself or else you will shake all your curls loose," he chuckled.

Beth tried to follow his advice. It was much easier said than done. Suddenly eager for something to do besides stand around and wait, she looked up at her father with imploring eyes. "Papa, about the other day—"

"Hush now, Beth. Your mother explained it all to me—numerous times upon request. I am not angry. My only wish at the present moment is for you to have a wonderful wedding."

He unlooped their arms for a moment so he could pull Beth into a tight hug. She thanked the heavens that Mama had been able to somehow ease Papa's concerns. To her surprise, that calmed some of her jitters.

Before Beth could say anything else, the church doors swung open. A hushed gasp signaled the bride's arrival and she stepped into the church with Papa at her side. In a flash of a moment, she absorbed the lovely floral arrangements stationed at each pew, which were filled with her extended family as well as Weston's. She avoided their gazes, too nervous to have so many eyes upon her.

Instead, as she took her first step down the aisle, she looked straight ahead at the altar. Weston was there, waiting for her. A surprising warmth washed over her entire body when their eyes met. He smiled at her the whole way. If Beth had not known any better, she would have assumed him to be head over heels in love. She walked toward him with more confidence, his sweet expression encouraging her.

A welcome certainty filled Beth's heart. Weston had always brought her comfort, support, and friendship. What more could she really want?

~

WESTON TOOK Beth's hand when she came to stand before him at the altar. The intoxicating fragrance from the generous floral arrangements made him almost dizzy. Or perhaps it was the mixture of excitement and nerves. Despite his many misgivings, Weston could not help grinning as he took in Beth's beauty. She wore a gorgeous cream gown, her lovely dark hair a mass of perfect curls under an intricate headpiece of delicate pearls.

Even more than that, though, Weston noticed that Beth did not look completely devastated to be marrying him. In fact, as the vicar started the ceremony, she gave him a dazzling, comforting smile. Her eyes almost seemed to say that she wanted this just as much as he did—and for the same reason.

Weston's heart soared as he only half listened to the words that would bind them as man and wife forever. His mind was so full of Beth, and the sudden hope that her expression had sparked in him. Perhaps, given time, this marriage could become something more than an escape for them both.

Throughout the ceremony, as his gaze remained fixed on Beth, and hers on him, Weston's guilt slowly evaporated. Surely no woman would look at her groom like this if she truly did not want this union.

When it came time to place the ring on Beth's finger, he did so with confidence—confidence that he still had a chance to win Beth's heart after all. The slim silver band carried the weight of this decision, yet when Beth's eyes traveled from the ring to Weston's face, he saw no regret there. Her soft smile seemed perfectly contented, as if she had been waiting for this moment.

The vicar joined their hands, and, taking a deep breath, announced, "I now pronounce you man and wife."

Beth beamed as a stifled giggle escaped her perfectly pink lips. Weston laughed, too, as the small church burst into a raucous round of applause. All that melted into the background as Weston and Beth made their way back down the aisle toward the double doors, still hand in hand, now joined together for the rest of their lives.

Chapter 9

Their comfortable carriage rumbled along the gravel driveway at a sedate pace. Beth's excitement pulsed as she leaned to the side, peering out the window to admire Hannover Grange, a second estate owned by Lord and Lady Shawberry. She inhaled sharply at her first sight of it, the house rising up to meet the clear blue sky, with grand columns lining the front porch while Gothic details stretched out along the walls. It was a handsome, spacious home. More importantly it was her home now.

"I must admit I am a bit nervous," Weston said from his seat across from Beth.

Without removing her eyes from Hannover Grange, Beth asked, "Why is that?"

"I have no idea what state this place is in. Mother said she had it spruced up during our engagement since no one has lived here in so long, but I doubt they have come themselves to inspect it. And unfortunately I only spent one miserable winter here when my parents had rented it to my uncle for a time. I never much liked my uncle so I do not have very many pleasant memories of Hannover Grange."

Beth removed her attention from the window and looked at her husband with a soft smile. "Fear not, Weston. You will soon forget all about your uncle because we will make new, better memories together."

This seemed to put Weston at ease, his broad shoulders dropping slightly. "And rest assured that you will have your own private rooms just as you did during our travels," he added quietly, a hint of a blush forming under his high cheekbones.

Beth's head whipped around to look out the window again. "I

appreciate that very much."

She understood what he meant, and she also understood that there were certain expectations wives had to adhere to. With all this happening so suddenly, Beth was certainly not ready to confront those expectations. Luckily for her, she had married an extremely understanding man. She knew without a doubt that Weston would never pressure her, though she knew at some point they would have to produce the much desired heir. The thought made the back of Beth's neck hot with embarrassment.

They slipped into silence, the only sound the gentle, steady rattling of the carriage laden with their luggage. From the corner of her eye, Beth saw that Weston was also looking out his own window. She took the opportunity to observe him more closely. She tilted her head to the side, noticing his handsome profile, strong jawline, and uniquely copper hair. He still looked just like the friend she had always known. A strange sensation spread through her chest, airy and warm. When would she start to see Weston as her husband?

Before Beth could even begin to contemplate an answer to that question, the carriage came to a stop and hurried voices surrounded them. Footmen sprang into action to collect their belongings and open the carriage door for them. Beth realized with a jolt that they were her household staff now. She actually had a household to manage, just as she had dreamed of all her life.

Weston stepped out first and held his hand out. That earlier sensation intensified when his fingers closed around hers. Somehow, it felt familiar and comfortable. Their hands had touched many times, after all. Yet the simple gesture also carried something fresh, something exciting.

Leaving all the bustle of unloading behind them, Beth and Weston approached Hannover Grange together, fingers intertwined. Weston paused just before the steps and turned to look at Beth.

"Welcome to your home," he said with a shy smile. Beth returned one of her own. They started up the front steps together.

The butler greeted them at the door and introduced himself as Mr. Curtis before stepping back and allowing the newlyweds to take stock of the place. They paused in the foyer, Weston peering around with a thoughtful frown. Beth bit her lip to stop from giggling at the delightful expression. She wondered what other expressions she would

see on his face over the course of their lives together.

Weston slowly turned to face Beth, his arms crossed over his chest. Without meaning to, Beth noticed the way his dark coat stretched a little over his muscular figure.

"Well, as I said, I have not been in this house in quite some time, nor has anyone else. I am afraid it is a bit outdated," he said with a disappointed sigh. He took a few steps, closing the distance between them, his arms falling to his sides so he could reach forward and grasp Beth's hands. "Please feel free to make any changes you wish—from the color of the wallpaper to the furnishings to the artwork. You can even completely rearrange rooms if that is your desire. Do just let me know beforehand so I do not walk into the library one morning to find the music room instead."

Despite his laugh, Beth knew he meant every word. She pulled him closer, threading her arm through his and allowing herself to lean against him.

"We will make this our home together," she promised in a whisper. "Now, shall we go explore and see how we can transform this place?"

~

A WARM BREEZE ruffled Weston's hair, gliding across his skin and tugging at his flowing frock coat. He looked down at the woman on his arm—his wife—as they walked around their new estate. The corner of his mouth pulled up in a smile as he noticed Beth's hand pressed to the top of her head in an attempt to keep her curls in place without much success. Her dark red walking dress, embroidered with black swirls, flopped about behind them, occasionally brushing against Weston's trousers.

He normally did not like being out and about on such a windy day. Today, with Beth by his side, he found he did not mind it so much—especially when she looked around them with that lovely light in her eyes. She appreciated everything and saw the beauty in all. Still, nothing could be as beautiful as Beth herself.

As Beth's eyes swept across the expansive lawn before them, she noticed Weston's gaze. She lifted a curious brow. "May I ask what is on your mind?"

Weston laughed, the sound swallowed by the wind. "I was just

wondering what was on your mind."

Beth looked straight ahead again with a hesitant smile, her eyes traveling over the back of Hannover Grange. "After our tour of the house yesterday, I have formulated some ideas for updates and changes that I would like to make."

A smile spread across Weston's face. It thrilled him to see Beth already settling into their shared home. He wanted her to be as comfortable as possible, to feel like she truly belonged here—with him. "Do tell."

"First, I think the most important thing is to order new furniture for the main rooms where we will be hosting our visitors the majority of the time," she started, her confidence building as she spoke. "Then I thought perhaps some new woodwork in the library. When I visited a friend in Derbyshire last year, her family's library had beautiful, intricate woodwork along the molding. Perhaps we can find a talented craftsman in the village to replicate it for us."

Weston's brows crept up his forehead. He certainly had not expected that level of thought and detail after having only been in the house for a day. He looked at his wife with admiration. "That sounds wonderful, Beth. When we return to the house, we can go to my study and I will compile a list of your ideas and everything you think we need. Then we can talk to the local craftsmen to get the process started."

Beth's entire face lit up, her cheeks round from her wide smile. "Then we should hurry and return to the house." She tugged on his arm and Weston let his head fall back as laughter rippled through him. Her enthusiasm was catching.

They nearly ran the rest of the way home, the wind shifting to give them a boost from behind. They arrived in the back foyer breathless and eager, though they slowed their pace as they navigated the first floor. They opened two wrong doors before finally stumbling upon Weston's study. True to his word, Weston sat at his desk while Beth dictated the new furniture pieces she wanted, going room by room, and then explained her vision for the wood carvings in the library in more detail. She smiled the entire time. Weston could see the vision coming together in her mind. He often had to remind himself to return his attention to the paper lest he miss something Beth said. It was far too easy to stare at her when she was so consumed by her excitement.

“Well, I think that’s everything,” Beth finally announced.

Weston glanced at his silver pocket watch. “And excellent timing, as well. I believe it is time to dress for dinner.”

Beth nodded, resting a hand on her stomach. “A good thing, too. I had no idea speaking so much for such a long period of time would make me so hungry,” she chuckled. “I have no idea how my more talkative family members do it.”

Weston stood and came around his desk, offering his arm to Beth and leading them out into the hallway. “Do not forget all the running about we did around the estate today.”

An embarrassed frown passed over Beth’s face as one hand shot up to her hair, still wild from the wind. “You are right, we had best head upstairs and get cleaned up for dinner. I am only sorry you had to see this mess.”

Weston stopped in his tracks and gave Beth a serious look. “Nonsense,” he said, his voice unusually low. “If I may be so bold, I do believe my wife is the loveliest woman in all the world—even when she is a bit windswept.”

Beth dropped her gaze to the long, slightly moth-eaten rug that ran the length of the hallway. Weston’s heart dropped. Surely he had made her uncomfortable. Then, the corner of her mouth twitched in a subtle smile that sent his heart shooting right back up to its proper place.

“Come, let us head to our quarters. I am certainly in desperate need of some freshening up.” He smiled as he ruffled his own hair, hoping to bring some levity back to the atmosphere. Beth giggled, her eyes narrowing into cheerful crescents.

As they made their way upstairs, passing by many various rooms they had not yet had a chance to fully investigate, a muffled commotion caught their attention just outside the drawing room. They paused as the sound of an angry voice penetrated the thick mahogany door. They exchanged confused glances. Weston nodded his head toward the drawing room in a silent question. Beth nodded.

As quietly as possible, Weston eased the door open, Beth clutching his arm in anticipation of whatever they might find. Instinctively, Weston angled himself so that his body blocked Beth as much as possible.

He relaxed only slightly when he found their housekeeper, Mrs.

Sharpe, if he remembered correctly, in the throes of an impassioned berating. The target was a young maid, probably no older than fifteen. The girl was almost in tears, flinching every time Mrs. Sharpe hurled another insult at her. Weston's eyes darted to a vase shattered on the ground beside the maid. Neither of them realized that they now had company in the room.

Beth stiffened beside Weston as she absorbed the scene before them. At first, he thought that the situation had distressed her peaceable spirit. After a moment Weston noticed the firm set of her jaw and her furrowed brows. She slipped her arm out of his and took a bold step forward, hands closed in loose fists at her sides.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded, her voice quiet but certain.

The maid nearly jumped out of her skin and the housekeeper spun around, the chatelaine at her waist laden with keys clanging harshly. Mrs. Sharpe quickly recovered from her surprise. She stepped forward as well, looking Beth up and down, her upper lip twitching in a barely suppressed snarl. She clearly did not like having a mistress in the house, someone to watch and criticize her every move. In stark contrast, the maid hung her head, not daring to look her new employer directly in the eyes.

Weston came up beside Beth, ready to lend his support however he could. "Mrs. Quincy asked you a question."

With an indignant huff, the housekeeper thrust an accusatory finger at the maid. "This simpleton started here last week when Lord and Lady Shawberry hired new help ahead of your arrival. Apparently, some of the older maids thought it would be a great lark to play a trick on her. They told her that the drawing room needed an extra midday cleaning even though the maids are supposed to do that first thing in the morning before you wake. So not only was this daft girl in a place where she could've been seen by the family or by guests, she had the nerve to go and break a vase."

Mrs. Sharpe churned the words out, spit occasionally flying, with such vehemence that Weston would have expected the crime to be of a far greater nature than the reality. The vein bulging in the middle of her forehead almost had Weston worried for her health. The maid let out an involuntary whimper when Mrs. Sharpe finished.

Beth looked over at Weston, catching his eye. They understood

each other perfectly without words.

“Mrs. Sharpe, as you said this girl is new—I am sorry, dear what is your name?” Beth started, shifting her attention from the housekeeper to the maid.

“Ellen Jacobs, ma’am,” she managed to choke out after another sniffle.

Beth rounded on Mrs. Sharpe once more. “Ellen is new. She has only been here a week and is unfamiliar with how the household is run. And anyone can accidentally break a vase at any time. If anyone is at fault, it is the other maids who played this trick on her.”

Weston simply watched and listened with awe as he witnessed Beth step into her role as the mistress of the house, the one responsible for managing all their female staff and ensuring that the household ran smoothly. It did not surprise him that Beth would choose to take a more active role than many other ladies did. Many would have simply left the poor maid to be verbally abused, allowing the housekeeper to use whatever methods she wished. Weston’s heart lifted with pride. His wonderful wife would not allow such a thing to happen under their roof.

Nor did it seem like she needed Weston’s help either, though he remained ready to give it at any moment. In fact, he found himself rather intrigued by this situation in a strange way. He had just learned something incredibly valuable about his wife, something he had not had an opportunity to see until this moment. Within her sweet, gentle nature was a fierce heart that did not shrink away from helping and protecting others.

As Beth approached the maid, a realization crashed over Weston. He had seen this side of Beth before. She had done the same thing for him, confronting Miss Cottsriff and offering herself in her place to save Weston from a lifetime of misery. He stood frozen, a deep, intense longing filling him from head to toe. He had never admired someone as much as he admired Beth, and he so wanted to tell her exactly how he felt.

Ellen burst into tears when Beth stopped before her, snapping Weston back into the moment. “I am terribly sorry, ma’am, truly,” the girl babbled through her sobs. “This is only my very first position. Are you going to take the cost of the vase out of my pay?”

“Hush, you foolish girl!” Mrs. Sharpe barked. Beth threw a

withering glance over her shoulder, impressively silencing the older woman.

She returned her attention to the maid, looking up at the taller young woman with a sweetly reassuring smile. “Of course not, Ellen. I understand that this was an honest mistake and you are just figuring out your way. I will be speaking with the other maids about what happened here, but in the future if you hear something from them and you are not sure, seek out Mrs. Sharpe for clarification first.”

Though Beth’s back was turned to him, Weston nodded his approval. He pressed his mouth into a firm line when Mrs. Sharpe looked to him with flabbergasted indignation, daring her to challenge the word of her mistress. With an unintelligible grumble, the housekeeper dropped her gaze to the floor. Since Weston came from a wealthy household and Beth came from a modest though well-managed fortune herself, they both knew that they would be garnishing Ellen’s wages for years—possibly even for the rest of her career—if they truly wanted to make her pay back the cost of the vase.

To Weston’s surprise, Beth stood on her tiptoes and whispered, still loud enough for Mrs. Sharpe to hear, “I did not much care for that vase after all.” Ellen relaxed ever so slightly, relief plain on her face.

“Go fetch a broom and clean up this mess,” Mrs. Sharpe commanded in a defeated tone. Ellen dipped into a clumsy curtsy and scurried from the room.

Mrs. Sharpe drew in a deep breath, presumably to set things straight with the new lady of the house. Beth was faster. She whirled around to face the housekeeper and marched right up to her, her confidence making her seem a full foot taller.

“I would prefer that the maids be treated with more kindness and understanding, Mrs. Sharpe,” Beth advised, firm yet still kind. Weston knew that Beth did not like raised voices or conflict. She had even told him before when they touched upon a similar topic on the treatment of household staff that she thought harsh words rarely ever accomplished anything.

The housekeeper glowered at Beth for a tense moment. Weston could practically see the woman battling her desire to tell off this stranger who was already trying to tell her how to perform her job after only being here for a day. Without anyone living in the house for

so long, Mrs. Sharpe had had the run of things and clearly did not enjoy the prospect of changing her ways.

Beth held her ground until Mrs. Sharpe finally mumbled her acknowledgement and stormed away. She remained in her spot for a moment before letting out a deep, long exhale. When she turned to Weston, he saw that her intertwined fingers gripped each other tightly and she was breathing heavier.

He rushed forward, eager to comfort. He had been so transfixed by her gentle bravery that he had not realized that Beth had actually been quite nervous to reprimand her staff, that it had taken a great deal of courage for her to stand up to someone else, even if she knew she was in the right.

"You did a wonderful job, Beth," he said, voice full of pride. He grasped her upper arms, pulling her closer to him. He only just managed to stop himself from embracing her, fearing that it would be too overwhelming in the situation. "And for what it is worth, I completely agree with everything you said to Ellen and Mrs. Sharpe."

Beth gave a shaky laugh. "Thank you, Weston."

She leaned forward, slipping a little deeper into Weston's arms, and let her forehead rest against his shoulder. All the breath in Weston's body disappeared. A little spark of his own courage told him to take the risk. He wrapped his arms around his wife and pressed her to his chest. Her soft figure fit perfectly against him.

A wonderful moment passed as Weston held Beth just as he had always wanted to. He had not a clue as to how much time had passed, nor did he care. He did not pull back until Beth's breathing eased to its normal pace and she finally stirred in his arms.

"Perhaps we should add finding a replacement for Mrs. Sharpe to our list if she does not take your words to heart," he teased, suddenly and painfully aware of the intimacy of the moment, and still terrified of crossing Beth's boundaries.

Beth laughed. Weston could feel the way her body shook just a bit with the sound. "I just want to give her another chance. This situation is new for her as well. It cannot be easy having a new woman in the house after so many years of doing things her own way."

Weston nodded understandingly. "I greatly admire your generosity, Mrs. Quincy." At the sound of her new name, Beth glanced up at him from under her long lashes.

“Thank you, Weston, for being there to support me and corroborating my decision,” she said, voice just barely a whisper. She shifted closer, bringing herself back into the waiting circle of Weston’s arms, though she let her gaze drop to the floor. “I truly want to do a good job as your wife and mistress of our home, even if our marriage came about in an unconventional way. I need to do my very best with my new role.”

The warmth rising up in Weston’s chest was enough to melt his heart. In fact, he thought it a miracle that he did not immediately dissolve into a puddle at Beth’s words. He leaned back slightly so he could rest his hands on her arms just below her shoulders. She looked up at him once more, almost expectantly. Weston would not allow himself to hope just yet as to what that expression might mean.

Of course he wanted to do more than this simple gesture, but he would not risk moving too far and too fast, especially when he still did not know for sure how Beth really felt about him now. Instead, he simply said, “You are off to a wonderful start, and I know you will be a brilliant wife. There is no need to pressure yourself. We are both new at this so we will learn along the way together.”

Beth’s eyes darted down to Weston’s mouth for the briefest of moments. Weston’s entire body froze. He certainly had not been expecting that sort of look. The hope that he had tried to stifle rose up again, stubborn and unflinching. Before Weston could gather his wits and decide whether or not to pursue this shift in the atmosphere between them, Beth took two steps back. Weston’s hands fell limply from her shoulders to his sides.

“I am very glad you think so. I have no doubt you will be a brilliant husband as well. You proved as much today.” She gave a shy half-smile and brushed her hands down the front of her dress. “I do believe in my limited experience that part of being a good husband and wife entails dressing appropriately for dinner.”

She stepped forward again, though not as close. She reached out and grasped one of Weston’s hands, giving it a quick squeeze. “I will see you in the dining room shortly.”

With that, Beth floated from the room, graceful as always. Weston lingered behind for several moments, occasionally looking from his hand to the door until Ellen returned with a broom and dustpan to sweep up her mistake. Not wanting to make the girl any more

nervous, he quickly quit the room and wandered toward his quarters in a daze.

That tiny voice of hope had sprouted generous wings in just the last few minutes. Could he have misinterpreted the intensity of the moment that had just passed between them? Or could Beth truly be falling for him?

Chapter 10



"Mr. and Mrs. Quincy," the butler said in his deep, regal tone as he swung the drawing room door open. "There are two guests waiting in the foyer downstairs. They wish to offer their congratulations to the newlyweds and make Mrs. Quincy's acquaintance."

Beth's stomach clenched at his announcement. This would be her first bride visit since marrying Weston and coming to live at Hannover Grange a week ago. She knew they were customary, that each new bride must endure them, especially if she ever hoped to make any friends or forge positive connections with the women in her new neighborhood. For a lady like Beth who did not much care for having so much attention on herself, the prospect of bride visits had always been her least anticipated aspect of married life.

She glanced to Weston. He had flipped back the top of his newspaper, already watching her. "I will be right here," he said with an encouraging smile.

Beth forced herself to breathe and returned her attention to Mr. Curtis. "Please have tea and biscuits sent up—and the guest as well, of course," she added hurriedly, already growing flustered.

As a wonderful testament to the efficiency of their new household staff, the tea service arrived at the same time as the guests. Mr. Curtis introduced them as Mrs. Newford and her companion, Miss Saunders. Beth and Weston greeted the older women at the door.

"I would be so pleased if you would come sit and take tea with me," Beth said with her best offering of a polite smile. She gestured toward the end of the sofa that had a small table and another chair beside it.

“Of course, we would be delighted.” Mrs. Newford strode into the room with a genial, self-assured air that eased Beth’s nerves slightly. Miss Saunders followed behind and Beth brought up the rear, allowing her another chance to seek encouragement from Weston. He nodded, though his smile seemed unusually tight.

Beth did not have time to ponder what that might mean. The two visitors made themselves comfortable on Beth’s brand new sofa while she took the single chair. The maid, the same one from the conflict with the housekeeper, set the silver tray down on the table. Beth gratefully busied her hands and poured out for the three of them.

“What a pleasure it is to meet you, Mrs. Quincy,” Mrs. Newford started right away. “Congratulations on making such a lovely match.” She sipped at her tea with a comically loud sigh, then fixed Beth with a thoughtful gaze. “I must admit that I had started to wonder if our dear young Mr. Quincy would ever marry. You see, he has always been such a friendly boy, but the girls in the area just never seemed to gravitate towards him.”

Hot indignation simmered under Beth’s skin. She glanced over at Weston, who sat in a chair by the window, far enough to give the ladies a bit of privacy while remaining close enough to contribute to the conversation as needed. His odd smile had only grown more severe. Beth’s heart ached for him. He often jested about this fact himself. It was different when someone else said it. If her eyes didn’t deceive her, Beth even noticed a pink tinge to the tips of his ears.

“Yes, that was indeed the case,” he chuckled. “It took some searching, but I’ve finally found the woman who is just right for me.”

It was Beth’s turn to go red. He had offered the compliment with such sincerity despite the awkwardness of the situation and the truth of their entire arrangement. Of course, the older ladies knew nothing about that. They cooed in unison, both pressing their hands over their hearts while they exchanged endeared glances.

By some miracle, Beth saw this as an opportunity to correct the course of the conversation and spare her husband from any further embarrassment. She shifted closer to the edge of her seat, cradling her still mostly full cup of tea in nervous hands, her fingertips quietly drumming against the fine china.

“I must say again that it is so kind of you to come visit me,” she offered. “I cannot wait to see more of the county where my husband

was raised. I would love to hear any recommendations you have to offer."

"Oh, you will simply love it," said Miss Saunders with a knowing nod. "I have lived here in Oxfordshire for five years now ever since my cousin's husband passed away and I became her companion. I find this county, and Shawberry in particular, to be very charming indeed."

Beth breathed a quiet sigh of relief and silently thanked Miss Saunders for easily accepting the new topic. "I completely agree. What little I have seen of the area thus far has been even lovelier than I imagined."

Her relief was unfortunately short-lived. She caught Mrs. Newford's raised brow from the corner of her eye. Beth knew now without a doubt that this lady was one of those who favored thinly veiled criticisms dressed in polite tones. She prayed fiercely that she would survive this surprise visit unscathed.

"Your own county must have been dreadfully dull if you hardly miss it," Mrs. Newford said with a nonchalant shrug that looked rather out of place for a lady of her status.

Beth felt her face growing crimson with embarrassment again. "I do miss Essex dearly, and all my precious memories there, but it is always exciting to get to know a new place."

Miss Saunders nodded approvingly. "Well said, Mrs. Quincy. You are a bright young lady indeed."

Beth gave a thankful smile to Miss Saunders when she saw that the other woman was not looking. She sensed that Mrs. Newford's cousin understood the challenges her new acquaintance faced and wanted to help where she could without offending her cousin. With a sharp eye, Beth took stock of the ladies' teacups. She jumped at the opportunity to have something to do and to give herself a minuscule break from her frustrations.

"Might I offer you more tea? And you, Weston?"

"How sweet you are," Mrs. Newford said, holding her cup out for Beth. She topped up both ladies before shamefully scurrying away to Weston, fully aware that she must look like a terrified little forest creature.

"Shame about this silver. It really could use another polish," a sharp whisper stabbed at Beth's back as she crossed the floor to

Weston.

She knew instinctively that she had not been meant to hear that comment. That did not prevent it from almost freezing her in her tracks and making her drop the offending silver tray to the ground. Throat dry, she paused before Weston and silently refilled his cup. When she passed it back, his fingers closed around hers for a comforting moment. When Beth's eyes met his, she saw only sympathy there.

As Beth returned to her place beside their visitors, Weston's amiable voice filled the room. "I am sorry, ladies, if anything in our home appears to be amiss. Since no one has lived here properly in quite some time, we are still just getting settled ourselves. It is quite a work in progress, but we greatly appreciate your understanding."

Beth sent a proud smile to Weston. He had made an excellent save, addressing Mrs. Newford's criticism indirectly with perfect poise.

The woman gave a dramatic nod. "Yes, I remember those days well. It was hard work getting our household in order when I and the late Mr. Newford first married."

Beth offered her appreciation for Mrs. Newford's belated understanding as she refilled her own cup, more than slightly annoyed that the woman could not have remembered the early days of her marriage and managing a new household before making that comment.

To Beth's immense relief, she and the older ladies settled into a pleasant chat about mundane topics for a while, ranging from the recent fashions Beth had seen during the Season in London to some of the traditional events Beth could look forward to in Shawberry. To her even greater relief, the conversation soon shifted to Weston's family, a topic she could hardly be expected to converse upon with great detail yet.

"Mother and Father are quite well, and very pleased, as you can imagine. Of course, they are also thrilled that my sister Louise and her husband will be welcoming the first grandchild in the family later this year. I must admit I have no idea how they are still standing after so many joyous events in the span of a few months."

Naturally, Mrs. Newford and Miss Saunders immediately latched onto this fascinating subject. Beth knew with a sinking feeling in her stomach that this would only produce more awkwardness. While the

older ladies expressed their enthusiastic congratulations, Beth made a mental note to gently inform Weston that touching upon his sister's happy news could inspire uncomfortable speculation for themselves, especially with guests who had already proven to be rather loose of tongue.

Just as Beth suspected, the older ladies exchanged sly looks. "I am sure you two will not be far behind," Mrs. Newford said with an eager twinkle in her eyes, as if she had a personal investment in the potential offspring of her county neighbors.

"Of course we are praying for a large, happy family," Beth said with an awkward smile and an even more awkward glance at Weston. They had only been married for two and a half weeks, including their honeymoon period that they'd spent at Shambrook Lodge. Even more importantly, they still behaved primarily as friends rather than husband and wife. As such, Beth and Weston had yet to broach that subject.

Mrs. Newford unexpectedly leaned forward and grabbed Beth's hand, which was currently clenched in her lap. "I hate to be forward, my dear, but I would urge you to start right away and try often. You might not know this, but the sad truth is that one can never tell how long it will take or if there will be any unfortunate losses."

Beth had to clench her teeth together to keep her mouth from falling open. Contrary to her own words, the woman did not at all sound like she hated to say such things. In fact, she seemed to take an odd sort of enjoyment in watching Beth sputter and Weston disappear behind a generous swig of tea.

Before Beth could recover, Mrs. Newford found she had more to say. "Of course, I never had any issues in that regard. I delivered eight healthy babies, all of whom grew into adulthood and are now parents themselves. But I have heard plenty of stories from my female relatives and friends," she finished with a sad shake of her head that Beth assumed was more performative than actually sympathetic.

"Thank you for your generous advice," was all Beth managed to mumble through her mortification. Instinctively, she peeked over at Weston once more and immediately realized her mistake. Her poor husband looked just as humiliated as Beth felt. Beth's already overwhelmed mind could not help wondering what exactly he thought of all this.

“I know you will likely be making many changes to Hannover Grange. It is what any new wife should do,” Mrs. Newford continued. “But do not forget to leave enough rooms dedicated to child rearing. You will need a nursery and a schoolroom and bedrooms for each child when they get older. It is such a shame to convert other rooms into children’s rooms later on. Better to have the children’s rooms already prepared ahead of time. Unless, of course, with Mr. Quincy being the future Lord Shawberry and the no doubt generous fortune that that entails, you plan on simply building additions to the house to accommodate your growing family. And then of course you will move into the big house after Mr. Quincy takes his title.”

Beth knew her cheeks had just colored to a deep shade of red she had never experienced before. How in the world had this visit gotten so away from her? She had never been overly skilled at directing conversations. That suited her sister Sophie much more. Even Rob would have likely done a better job. Still, Beth had given it a valiant effort and had managed to redirect tactless topics before. Yet Mrs. Newford seemed determined to discuss such intimate topics as falling pregnant, housing arrangements, and the eventual passing of Weston’s father. The woman would not be deterred, no matter how hard Beth tried.

Completely at a loss for words, she only managed to weakly clear her throat. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Weston watching her with deep regret. When their eyes met he shot up from his chair and looked across the room at the clock above the fireplace.

With a dramatic gasp, he turned around to face Beth. “Goodness, we let the time get away from us. You are supposed to meet with the housekeeper to discuss that matter about the new maids.” He rushed out the words, eyes locked on Beth, communicating something else entirely to her and her alone.

Beth’s confusion persisted until Weston flashed the briefest of smiles at her. Realization and relief dawned on her in one fell swoop. He was offering her a chance to escape. She was about to refuse with some excuse about rescheduling the fictitious meeting. How could she leave Weston here to suffer on his own with these nosy neighbors?

The kind understanding in his eyes encouraged her to go, that he did not mind at all and would rather she be comfortable away from their scrutiny. Beth read all this in one simple look. Clearly,

throughout their two Seasons together and even in this short period that they had been married, she and Weston had come to understand each other on a deeper level than she realized.

Borrowing a page from Mrs. Newford and Miss Saunders, Beth's hand flew up to her chest. "Thank you so much for reminding me, my dear husband. I had completely forgotten it in my excitement to meet our wonderful new neighbors."

Miss Saunders furrowed her brow, more disappointed than offended. "Surely the housekeeper can wait. You are the mistress after all, and your time is the most valuable," she insisted.

Beth nearly leapt up from her chair, desperate to quit the room now that an opportunity had presented itself. She offered both ladies an apologetic smile. "I am afraid I must go. I wish to start off on the right foot with my staff and ensure that my household—and anyone who steps inside—will be properly cared for."

She did not give either of them any further chances to protest. She flew across the room toward the door, pausing only to look over her shoulder and mouth a "thank you" to Weston.

He offered a warm smile in response. Just as Beth closed the door behind her, she heard Mrs. Newford say, "I swear I have never seen a young man so completely smitten with his bride."

As Beth shut the door on those words, her heart performed a strange flip. She did not allow herself to dwell on it, instead hurrying down the hallway until it branched off to another section of the house. She met a footman on her way and informed him that she would be in the music room should Mr. Quincy ask after her.

She slipped into the still mostly unused room. It was lower on her list of rooms to freshen up with new furniture, wallpaper, and artwork. She was confident that should their neighbors request a tour, Weston would politely decline to show them this particular room since he knew Beth had not yet had a chance to update it to her liking.

Far too distracted and overwhelmed to actually perform any music, Beth simply paced up and down the large room, feeling more and more guilty with each passing minute for abandoning Weston.

After some undetermined period of time, she heard a gentle knock on the door. It opened before she could answer, and Weston stepped in. She rushed up to him immediately. "Finally!"

Weston chuckled. "Finally? It has only been twenty minutes. Now

tell me, how was your urgent meeting with the housekeeper?" He gave her a teasing smile that inspired her heart to perform that unusual flip once more.

"As a matter of fact, we invented a whole new system for household management while you kept those two…interesting ladies entertained," she joked. The tension in her shoulders and the nerves fluttering in her stomach disappeared upon seeing Weston's easygoing smile.

"Unfortunately, they grew tired of me quite quickly after you left and decided it was time to return home."

Her heart twirled again and it seemed to propel her forward. She closed the remaining distance between them. "Still, I am terribly sorry for leaving you behind. All those things Mrs. Newford was saying…it was all so horribly embarrassing."

Weston angled his head down, bringing his face closer ever so slightly. He put a gentle hand on her cheek. Everything in her stilled in surprise, from her heartbeat to her pulse to her very breath.

"They were being very rude, Beth," he admitted freely. "I must confess that I have met those ladies before, particularly Mrs. Newford, during my childhood. I did not like them then either. If I had thought to ask Curtis for the names of our visitors, I might have concocted some excuse to avoid them entirely."

Beth could see the regret in his warm brown eyes. Without realizing what she was doing, she leaned into his comfortable touch.

"Thank you for knowing me so well that you realized I was overwhelmed and needed to escape," she whispered, feeling the heat of her own breath against his soft palm.

"I would do anything for my wife," Weston responded, his voice low and meaningful as well.

They stood just like that for several moments. Beth sensed that Weston longed to come even closer. She knew that she wanted to come closer as well. A quiet yet powerful part of her told her that she shouldn't.

When Weston slowly dipped his head even lower, his lips brushing against Beth's temple, something in her snapped. That quiet voice roared back to the forefront of her mind and she realized the charged potential of this moment. What was she doing standing here with Weston like this? Just a few weeks ago, she had been doubting her

decision to go through with a marriage to someone she did not love.

She lifted her eyes and was met with patient understanding. Beth finally allowed herself to wonder for the first time…. What if she could love Weston? What if she already did?

Beth knew she could not answer that question with him standing so close, holding her like he was about to kiss her, looking at her like this.

She forced air back into her lungs and stiffened her spine. She mustered what she hoped was a perfectly normal smile. “Thank you once again for your help today. I should like to go to my room and recover from that ordeal. And write a letter to Sophie. She will no doubt find this experience to be amusing to the highest degree.”

Weston did not hesitate to step back, though he allowed his hands to slip down her arms as he released her. “You can find me in the library when you are done if you want company.”

Beth nodded and hurried from the room, leaving Weston behind just as she had done earlier. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw him still watching her, an unmistakable hint of longing in his eyes.

Chapter 11



A pleasant silence filled the breakfast room aside from the gentle scraping of cutlery. Weston looked over at Beth, seated beside him at the head of the table. Her back was to the grand window that had made the breakfast room one of his favorite places in Hannover Grange over these past two months. Morning sunlight spilled in through the glass, bathing his wife in a heavenly glow that highlighted her soft beauty.

They had been married for just over two months now, and Weston still could not believe that Beth somehow managed to become more beautiful each day—even when she had a bit of marmalade from her toast stuck to the corner of her mouth. Absentmindedly, he leaned forward and swiped it away with his napkin.

"Thank you," Beth mumbled, self-consciously dabbing at her mouth with her own napkin.

Weston leaned back in his chair and returned to his delicious ham. Despite the early issues they had had with Mrs. Sharpe and a few other mild bumps along the way, their cook had never proven to be anything less than perfect. He was very glad for that. He did not want anything else causing undue stress for Beth.

As they enjoyed their breakfast, Weston reflected on their marriage thus far. They had grown closer every day, though Weston of course still took his cues from Beth. He knew without a doubt by now that his feelings were growing—even more so than they had over the course of their friendship prior to their marriage. Still, Weston could not bear the idea of putting any more pressure on her. She had done so much for him already. He hardly deserved to ask for more, though that selfish, hopeful little spark in his heart constantly urged him to do

just that.

He glanced over to her once more with a contented smile. He took it as a good sign that she had started eating breakfast with him every morning instead of simply taking a tray in her bedroom like many married ladies chose to do.

Weston frowned, noticing that Beth's fork had stilled in her hand, her eyes narrowed in concentration as she poured over a journal, slowly reading each word and line.

"Is something wrong?" he asked around a mouth full of food.

Beth snapped out of her reverie with a delightful giggle, pointing at her own mouth.

"Goodness, forgive me," Weston mumbled. He quickly covered his mouth with his napkin, swallowing discreetly.

After her laughter died away, Beth gave a weary sigh. "I am just double checking everything. I cannot believe my family will be arriving tomorrow."

Weston gave an understanding nod. He knew how excited she was to see her parents and siblings, grandparents, and Uncle Dalton, Aunt Winnie, and their children. She was also terribly nervous. This would be her first time showing them the new home she had worked so hard to make their own.

Surprising even himself, Weston abandoned his beloved breakfast and knelt down beside Beth. "We will have a wonderful visit. I know you have everything under control. You have even managed to whip Mrs. Sharpe into shape."

Beth laughed, and Weston reveled in the sound. He wanted to make her laugh like this every single day.

"I will be right by your side no matter what. You can rely on me for whatever help you need during the chaos and excitement," he added.

His wife's expression softened. Weston could see that she was genuinely touched. "I am not sure why I am so anxious about making a good impression on my own family. They are hardly ones to judge."

Weston hummed, considering her confession. "Well, perhaps it is because you have started a new chapter of your life. You want to show them that you are thriving in it, that they can be proud of the woman you have become."

Beth hummed as well, nodding slowly. "Yes, I think you are right.

But I must thank you for all the help you have already given with the planning. You have made the process much more bearable."

A grin spread across Weston's face and he reached for one of her hands. "It seems we are already doing quite well with all this marriage business."

He lifted her hand and kissed the bare skin of her knuckles. His lips were still on her when he realized what he had done. He looked up immediately to see Beth staring at him in wide eyed surprise. Weston stared back, just as shocked by his own boldness. He had just been thinking moments ago that he should not take any actions that might pressure her.

"I am terribly sorry," he stammered as he stood up to his full height, face engulfed in the heat of embarrassment.

To his even greater surprise, Beth's hand shot out and grabbed his before he could move further away. She looked down at her half full plate of food without seeing it.

"Thank you, Weston," she mumbled. Her thumb gently brushed over his hand for a moment.

Weston's heart hammered in his throat as his mind desperately tried to process what had just happened. Not daring to press his luck, he muttered something about going to his study to answer some letters, to which Beth responded that she had to speak with Mrs. Sharpe to ensure that the last minute preparations were on track to be completed before the grand arrival tomorrow.

They left the breakfast room together, heading in opposite directions once they reached the hallway. As far as Weston knew, neither of them looked over their shoulders at the others. His blood roared in his ears during the entire trip to his study.

As the shock slowly subsided, Weston could not help smiling at the memory. He would take this as a very good sign indeed.

~

THE DRAWING ROOM buzzed with a dizzying array of sounds. Many familiar faces surrounded her, unexpected against this backdrop that was still relatively new for her. Her immediate and extended family had all gathered in the drawing room to mingle before dinner. Beth watched in silent awe, the reality of her family's visit taking its time

to sink in.

In one corner she saw Uncle Dalton telling Weston, Papa, and Grandmama a very enthusiastic and apparently hilarious story. By the fireplace Mama, Aunt Winnie, and Grandpapa watched over the younger children. Beth's cousins Helen, Hannah, and Hayes played marbles on the large blue rug, their friendly competition occasionally growing heated.

"Hugh, let's go play marbles," Rob pleaded, his arms locked around his older cousin.

Hugh, Uncle Dalton's and Aunt Winnie's oldest child, cocked his head to the side as he gave Beth a bemused smile. They were all well used to Rob's antics, particularly his hero worship of Hugh.

"I am sure you already regret inviting our dear little brother," Sophie said to Beth with a teasing smirk.

Of course, Rob did not take kindly to this. He clung even more fiercely to Hugh. "I have not seen him in ages and I want to spend time with my favorite cousin," he insisted with a very generous pout.

The good-natured young man chuckled and ruffled Rob's hair. He threw a sly smile over his shoulder when he heard Beth's mother sigh in exasperation. Returning his attention to his cousin, Hugh leaned down and whispered, "We will get into all sorts of mischief together during our stay. For now, I want to talk with my beloved cousin and congratulate her since I was unable to attend the wedding. Now why don't you go play marbles with the other children and tomorrow we will run about the grounds together."

Rob scratched his chin and thought for a moment. He gave a vigorous nod and then skipped over to their other cousins.

"Walk when indoors, please," Papa called after him.

"Come here first, Rob, so I can fix your hair," Mama commanded. The boy dragged his feet as he slinked over to their mother.

"My apologies, Aunt Anna," Hugh offered with a charming smile. Mama simply chuckled and waved her hand for her nephew to return to his conversation. In all actuality, she knew that Rob's hair was liable to turn into a mess with or without Hugh's help.

Beth and Sophie both turned to Hugh with impressed expressions.

"Congratulations on an expert escape," Sophie laughed.

Hugh simply shrugged. "Rob likes me better than you so he listens to me."

Beth watched her younger brother sprawled on the floor with his other Harcourt cousins. She sighed lovingly. “Poor Robert’s greatest regret in life was being born with only two older sisters.”

Hugh returned his attention to Beth, his green eyes watching her intently. “I must admit, Beth, you make married life look quite attractive.”

Sophie did not bother to hide her grimace. “Of course I am so very happy for you and Weston, but I must confess that I still do not see the appeal.”

Feeling perfectly at ease with her family and no longer so worried about impressing them, Beth wrinkled her nose at her stubborn future spinster sister. She looked pointedly at Hugh. “Married life has been so wonderful. I pray that everyone can find such happiness in their lives—even you two.”

Sophie and Hugh exchanged incredulous glances. Neither had shown any particular interest in marriage, though for different reasons.

While her sister and cousin discussed their similar opinions on the subject, Beth glanced over to Weston. He already seemed to fit in with her family so perfectly. The truth of her words echoed in her heart. She truly had been enjoying being married—married to Weston.

Taking her by surprise, Hugh clapped Beth on the shoulder in a very masculine manner. “I truly am happy to see you so happy, cousin,” he said with a genuine smile. “Perhaps it will be my turn in two years or so, and I will be sure to ask your advice when the time comes.”

“Have you forgotten that you are not at Eton right now?” Beth giggled, shrugging her shoulders to shake off his hand. Realizing what he had done, he let his head fall back and a roaring laugh escaped.

Before prim and proper Aunt Winnie could scold Hugh, Curtis opened the door to the adjoining dining room and announced that dinner was ready. Beth panicked for a moment when she realized that everyone in the room was looking at her. She remembered with a jolt that she was the hostess now. It was now her responsibility to decide the order in which they would file into the dining room.

Beth stepped forward, fiddling with her amethyst skirts self-consciously as she addressed the room. “Since we are all family and I do not mind a more informal affair, all the couples can go in together

and then the children can pair up. And we can sit wherever we please."

"Charming idea, little Beth," Uncle Dalton cheered. He had already grasped Aunt Winnie's hand and pulled her forward eagerly. Everyone laughed at this. They all knew that Uncle Dalton had the biggest appetite of anyone in the entire family thanks to his boundless energy, currently only rivaled by his own teenaged son.

Beth watched, relaxing again as everyone fell into line, content with the arrangement. She felt silly for not realizing that her loving, close-knit family would not care about rank or fancy presentations amongst themselves. The adults all found their partners while Sophie and Hugh looped arms, and then Rob paired with Helen, and Hannah with Hayes. With everyone ready, Beth took Weston's offered arm. The newlyweds led the large family into the dining room.

With surprising sadness, Beth watched longingly as Weston made his way to the opposite end of the table while she took the head as the hostess. Since it was just the two of them for most meals, they usually sat together. As everyone settled into their seats, Beth's attention drifted away from Weston to the majestic spread of food on the table as well as the heavy trays carried around the room by the footmen. After she absorbed as much of it as she could see, she looked across to Weston with a triumphant smile. They had designed the menu together along with their cook. Her family clearly seemed to be enjoying the food as well. An unusual silence filled the room as everyone lost themselves in their delectable meals.

Weston offered her a proud smile from his spot at the other end of the table. Beth finally allowed herself to truly relax for the first time since her family's arrival that morning. She and Weston had worked very well together to organize all this. In fact, Beth knew that she could not have produced such a result without his help. She did not even have to ask for Weston to go above and beyond for her. He was always there, ready and willing to assist and offering to shoulder some of her burdens at every opportunity.

A delighted hum to her left drew Beth's attention. She found her grandmother deeply enveloped in the joy of a delicious soup. Beth chuckled quietly, which in turn drew Grandmama's attention to her.

The baroness offered a warm smile and then leaned closer. "It is so wonderful to see a pair of newlyweds so in love and so dedicated to

each other," Grandmama whispered, love and pride aglow in her eyes.

"Thank you, Grandmama," Beth responded, trying to keep her voice even so as not to betray her surprise at this unprompted statement.

She looked across at Weston once more. He did not notice, engaged in a conversation with Grandpapa. For a moment, Beth's eyes traced the gentle slope of his nose, the inviting plumpness of his lips, and his thick red hair that glowed bright under the light of the chandeliers.

Something deep inside her, something she had been telling herself to ignore, responded fiercely to her grandmother's comment—almost as if agreeing.

Chapter 12



The dark curls that framed Beth's face danced as a stiff, warm wind swept past her. It carried the cheerful sound of laughter with it. She absentmindedly played with the trimmed blades of grass at the edge of the blanket she occupied, shaded by a large canopy. She tried not to think of the inevitable, instead reminding herself to enjoy this precious moment. That was easier said than done when she knew everyone save for Hugh would be starting the journeys back to their own homes tomorrow.

Even the sweet cakes she nibbled on and washed down with tea could not fully remove the melancholy sting of that reality. Beth watched as the children played under the late summer sunshine while the older family members chatted and laughed together under the shade. This visit had been wonderful, far better than she could've hoped.

She also had not realized until coming to Hannover Grange how badly she would miss her family. Before, she had only been focused on falling in love and getting married. In her typical naïve fashion, Beth had not thought about what would come afterwards, like moving to an unfamiliar place and not having her loved ones nearby. She looked down at her lap and brushed away some crumbs that had fallen onto her deep blue silk gown, trying to hide themselves amongst the lovely floral details. Her gloomy spirit would not be so easily dismissed.

With the dusting of cake bits gone and nothing else to occupy her mind while everyone else mingled, Beth looked up again. Her eyes immediately wandered to Weston for the hundredth time that day. A smile tugged at her mouth as she watched him play shuttlecock with Rob, Helen, Hannah, and Hayes.

As was typical with this particular combination of cousins, the children ran about with reckless abandon and no one tried to stop them. Weston seemed to be enjoying himself just as much, putting all his energy into the game, a beaming smile stretched wide across his cheeks which were rosy from exertion. Despite her dejection in anticipation of the following day, looking at Weston always brightened Beth's spirits.

He truly had assimilated into her family over these past two weeks. His kindness, energy, and humor made him a favorite of the children and the adults alike. Beth knew she should consider herself to be very lucky in that regard. She had heard far too many tales of spouses conflicting with their in-laws. She laughed quietly when she saw Weston groan with entertaining exaggeration after purposely missing the birdie so that Hayes could have a shot at it. Beth should have known that that would not be a worry with Weston. How could anyone not adore his charming, good-natured spirit?

A harsh *thwack* immediately followed by a piteous cry immediately drew everyone's attention back to the field. Rob's arm was still raised high with racket poised in midair. Hannah clutched the side of her head, eyes squeezed shut. Weston immediately sprang into action, calling for the other children to pause the game. He rushed over to Hannah in a few long strides, dropping to one knee before her and grasping her other hand ever so gently.

"Hannah, are you hurt?" he asked, the warmth in his voice setting Beth's heart aflutter despite the circumstances.

"Well, if you hadn't got in my way—" Rob huffed, glaring at his cousin as he indignantly crossed his arms over his chest, racket dangling to one side.

"Robert, apologize to Hannah at once," Papa demanded in his deep, firm voice. He stood from his chair, arms also crossed and looking much more like his only son than he likely realized.

Despite his initial reactions to such situations, Rob was never one to argue too much after being scolded. His linked arms dropped to his sides, the tip of his racket dragging along the ground as he approached Hannah, head bowed sheepishly.

"I am sorry, Hannah. I did not mean to hurt you, but I am sorry that I did…" He glanced over to his parents with large, remorseful eyes. Papa raised his brow. "And I am sorry for trying to blame you

for my mistake," Rob continued in a quieter tone.

The girl eyed her cousin suspiciously before finally giving a begrudging nod of acceptance. Ever sweet and patient, Hannah smiled when Rob hesitantly patted her on the shoulder.

"Would you like to have a rest, Hannah?" Weston asked after peace had been made between the children once more. Hannah nodded, one hand still atop her head. "Go on without us," Weston called to the other shuttlecock players. Feeling that the situation had been adequately resolved, the remaining cousins resumed their play.

With one arm slung low over Hannah's shoulders, Weston guided the girl toward the canopy where her parents watched from the shade. Uncle Dalton, already standing and prepared to intervene further, immediately scooped his oldest daughter up into his embrace with a comforting smile.

"Dalton, be careful," Aunt Winnie chided from her spot near the low table full of treats where she had been chatting with Sophie.

Hannah burst into laughter at her father's playful antics. Everyone else joined, even Aunt Winnie. The atmosphere relaxed once more now that Hannah had returned to her usual bright spirits, no real damage done.

Though of course Beth worried for her young cousin, she was very familiar with these types of bumps and scrapes to know that Hannah would be perfectly fine after a few moments of basking in extra attention from the adults.

This allowed her time to observe her husband once more. She had not had many opportunities to see him interact with children until this visit. A small smile found its way onto her lips. She quite admired how he had handled this—concerned yet calm, gentle and caring. Weston nodded with relief as he exchanged glances with Uncle Dalton and Aunt Winnie. Then he spun around and jogged back out onto the field, into the sunshine to play once more with Rob, Helen, and Hayes.

"That brief scene of drama allowed me to extract myself from my conversation with your grandmother," Mama said, suddenly appearing beside Beth. She looked up and patted the spot on the blanket beside her. Mama settled down with the grace that Beth had always admired and tried to emulate.

"I am sorry to say it, but I do not think that Grandmama has noticed your absence," Beth giggled, subtly pointing to the opposite

end of the canopy. The baroness had joined Uncle Dalton and Aunt Winnie in their fussing over Hannah. She stroked her granddaughter's hair, eyes brimming with concern. "She has some urgent doting to do."

Mama looked over and chuckled, shaking her head. "I swear, she was never that worried over such tiny bumps when we were growing up. Perhaps having such a rambunctious son like Dalton numbed her to it. Though I suppose perhaps it is different when it comes to one's grandchildren."

At that, Mama sent a curious glance over to Beth. She swallowed and looked away, suddenly eager for space. Even knowing the truth of their marriage, Mama still likely had dreams about doting on grandchildren of her own someday.

"Thank you for hosting us in your beautiful home, Mrs. Quincy," Mama said with a smile.

Beth breathed an internal sigh of relief. She knew it would have been very unlikely for her mother to bring up something so intimate unprompted. Unlike many others Beth knew—Mrs. Newford and Miss Saunders coming immediately to mind—her dear mother always seemed to know when it was best to leave such things alone. Like Beth, Mama hated making anyone uncomfortable.

Just as she had often done as a girl, Beth scooted closer and snuggled into Mama's side. She did not care that she was a grown woman now. She would always be her mother's daughter. Mama wrapped her arm around Beth's shoulders, pulling her even deeper into her comfort, and placed a gentle kiss on the top of Beth's head.

"Don't forget to thank Weston as well. He truly was an incredible help with all of this preparation," Beth reminded, her eyes naturally following Weston as he jaunted about the lawn.

When Mama did not answer right away, Beth glanced at the woman from the corner of her eye. She saw that her mother was also watching Weston with a soft smile. Beth nearly jumped when Mama suddenly turned her gaze to her.

"Are you happy, my Beth?"

Without hesitation, Beth's heart leapt and twirled in her chest. She looked from Mama to Weston and back again. "I am indeed very happy. I am so very happy with Weston."

Mama's eyes softened. She slipped her other arm around Beth as

well, holding them both in a gentle embrace. “I am so thrilled to hear that. And I am sorry for being negative about it before the wedding,” she added in a near whisper. “I can see now that despite my misgivings, you have made the right choice. I have always known that Weston is a lovely young man, but over the course of this visit I have seen just how much he respects, values, and adores you…”

Her words trailed off into a thoughtful silence, as if weighing whether or not she should say whatever else lingered on her mind.

Beth eyed Mama, her mouth tugging to the side in a curious expression. With a gentle nudge of her elbow, she said, “Please continue.”

Mama looked down at Beth, difficult given the angle, yet Beth could still see the serious contemplation in her mother’s eyes. Mama brought a finger to Beth’s forehead, softly brushing aside a strand of hair that had come loose.

“I hope you do not mind me being so bold…. I know it might not have started this way, but I believe that your husband has developed real affections for you.”

Beth looked away again, one part of her self-conscious while the other part longed to cling to those words with hope. “Do you truly think so?” she asked quietly.

It had been quite difficult for Beth to read Weston. At times, she thought it plain as day that he had feelings for her—perhaps even love. Yet he had always been so careful with her, giving her whatever space and time she needed, never being too presumptive. Was that out of consideration for Beth’s own feelings, or because that was the distance he wanted?

Mama rested her cheek against Beth’s temple. “I am positive. I have seen the way Weston looks at you and heard the way he talks about you when you are not there to hear.” She paused again, deliberating over her words once more. “I had thought when you and Weston first met that he might ask to court you, but he never did so I assumed that he was simply being his usual friendly self. Now, I am inclined once again to think that perhaps he did quite like you from the start.”

Beth’s head spun at those words, and she was grateful to be seated upon the comforting firmness of the earth. Had she been standing, or even sitting in a chair, Beth thought she might very well have toppled

over with the wave of emotion that barreled into her.

Could Weston truly have had affections for her this entire time? Just like Mama, Beth had always assumed that he never pursued a courtship with her because he only saw her as a friend.

Another even more shocking revelation followed rapidly on the heels of that question. Had that assumption hindered Beth from developing feelings for Weston from the very start?

"I yield! I yield! You rascals win," Weston cried dramatically, his sweet, light voice suddenly filling Beth's ears, echoing in her heart. Her eyes focused once more on the real world, sunshine and bright green grass and familiar laughter infiltrating her senses.

"No, brother, do not leave us," Rob begged. He threw his racket to the ground and tugged at Weston's coat sleeve, bottom lip pushed out in his signature pout.

Laughter rumbled through Weston, his head falling back as the lovely sound filled the air. His hair, dark and slick with sweat, flopped against his forehead, both casual and endearing at the same time. He ruffled Rob's mop of a head with a breathless smile. "I am an old man, dear Rob. And old men need rest from time to time."

"Congratulations to my new cousin on a valiant effort," Hugh called from beneath the canopy. He stood from his chair beside Beth's father and grandfather, swinging his arms out wide and tilting his head from side to side. "I will take Weston's place if you all will have me."

Of course, Rob could never reject his favorite cousin. The boy cheered, jumping up and down before snatching up his racket once more.

"You know, I think I will join as well." Everyone turned to look at Sophie in surprise. She had not often indulged in lawn games once she had gotten older. She glanced around at her family with a frown. "What? Hugh and I have a score we need to settle from our last shuttlecock match. Did you think I had forgotten?"

Sophie set her plate of treats down beside Aunt Winnie and marched forward with a confident challenge in her gait. She glared good-naturedly at her older cousin, though Hugh was only her senior by about five months.

Hugh shook his head with a chuckle. "I rather hoped you had."

"You have made a grave error this day," Sophie announced,

carefully selecting a racket from the pile of spares.

Weston sent a grateful smile to Hugh as he scurried away from the drama. Hugh clapped him on the shoulder like an old friend when they passed each other. He quickly handed off his racket to the new player.

Weston made straight for Beth and Mama. Beth averted her gaze when her eyes longed to linger on her husband's chest, still heaving from the exertion of a long afternoon play in the full heat of a late summer day. Instead, she forced herself to look at Weston's face, which might have been even worse. The sparkle of pure joy in his eyes threatened to send Beth soaring straight into the sky.

"Ladies, I hope my disheveled appearance will not scare you away," he said, a light laugh in every word. "Could I speak with my wife for a moment?" he asked with a charming smile, his eyes locking onto Beth's.

When Beth did not answer immediately, frozen in place by Weston's gaze, Mama gave her a slight shake. Beth cleared her throat and nodded quickly, accepting Weston's offered hand. He helped her up, his easy strength making Beth feel lighter than air. He held her hand as he led her away from the canopy and into the sunlight. Beth could not help staring despite knowing how foolish she must look. How could she not stare when the sun set his red hair ablaze and illuminated every handsome feature so perfectly?

Since Weston had brought Beth behind the canopy, no one was watching when he intertwined their fingers. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I am," Beth answered with a smile. "Despite all the busyness and anxiety of making sure everything is just right."

Weston's expression softened. "Wonderful. Though I know you will miss your family when they leave," he said with a touch of sadness. "Please invite them back anytime you wish—or you can go visit them whenever you like as well. I hate the thought of depriving you of your loved ones."

Beth's chest swelled. She could see the sincerity in Weston's face. That small part of her, the part that had been growing unexpectedly fast during these past two weeks, whispered to Beth that perhaps Weston really was one of her loved ones now.

"Thank you, husband. But I will say that I have been quite content

here with you in our home."

Weston's eyes widened in surprise before a beaming smile blazed across his face. Beth sensed that she had just made Weston far happier than she had expected with that simple statement. Her own happiness sang inside her, longing to produce such a reaction from him again and again and again.

Suddenly, all of Beth's earlier hesitations seemed so unfounded. Why had she ever thought that Weston couldn't be the man for her?

~

THE SUN SET over the lawn, slowly slipping behind the distant tree line, painting the sky in bold oranges and beautiful pinks. Everyone had had their fill of picnicking and shuttlecock. Their happy group, pleasantly weary from a day in the sun, slowly walked across the large field back towards Hannover Grange. Even the playful children had finally burned away some of their energy. Rob clung to Mrs. Waynford's hand and little Hayes snuggled deep into Mr. Harcourt's arms.

Beth and Weston were arm in arm the whole way, looking just like all the other couples from Beth's family. Weston felt Beth lean deeper into his side as they entered the back foyer and walked through to the front of the house toward the main stairway. Pride and happiness radiated through Weston. He loved that Beth now felt so comfortable with him, that she relied on him even in these simple moments.

In one final burst of energy, Rob, Helen, and Hannah raced up the stairs. Hayes wiggled until Mr. Harcourt finally set him down and he hurried after the others, thumping feet echoing against the wood. Hugh and Sophie followed at a more leisurely pace, as did the other couples with the exception of Beth's father. Weston watched curiously as he slipped into the nearby library.

Beth and Weston pulled apart, silently watching each other as they lingered at the foot of the stairs. The moment felt both comfortable yet tense, charged with some unrecognizable emotion.

"I will see you at dinner, then," Beth finally said. She sounded both regretful to be leaving him now and already eager to spend time with him again shortly.

"Of course. I will be up soon, I just have something I would like to

check on." Weston nodded toward the stairs, not bothering to hide the longing behind his smile. Beth hesitated again. "I will see you soon," Weston added. He rested a hand on his wife's elbow, giving it a brief squeeze.

She nodded with an almost imperceptible sigh and started up the stairs. Weston watched for a moment, appreciating her breathtaking grace even in such a normal action, the hem of her lovely indigo dress whispering against the steps. He quickly pulled himself out of his reverie. There truly was something he needed to see to first.

Just like the other man, Weston snuck into the library. "Is there anything I can help with, sir?"

Mr. Waynford turned away from the shelves, hands still behind his back. "No, I was just admiring the moulding for a moment," he answered with a kind smile.

Weston chuckled, his eyes drifting up toward the ceiling. "Beth plans on having the moulding redone with some intricate woodwork. She says the current style in the room is outdated."

"Ah, is that so?" Mr. Waynford sighed. "That is just like my Beth. She prefers to stay current on these trends. Anything her papa likes is no doubt considered ancient."

"I suppose that is how these things go. Well, if there is nothing you need, I will go up and dress for dinner." He turned on his heel toward the door.

"Weston, wait," Mr. Waynford called.

Surprised, Weston turned again to see Beth's father watching him with an earnest expression. "Is something wrong?"

Mr. Waynford took a few steps forward, still leaving plenty of distance between the two men. He brought his hands to his sides, fingers opening and closing, trying to appear relaxed and casual.

"I know the truth of your marriage. Anna told me," he started, his voice slightly gruff though not angry—at least Weston fervently prayed that he was not angry.

Just like that, after a few weeks of peace, Weston's old guilt surged to the front of his mind, filling his stomach with that vaguely sick feeling. "I am sorry. I know this is not how most fathers would want to send off their daughters."

Mr. Waynford took another step forward and gave Weston a surprisingly comforting smile. It almost looked out of place among his

normally stoic features, yet Weston could see its sincerity.

"I will not lie and say that I was not extremely concerned at first. But after this visit here, I am happy to say that I completely trust that Beth is in good hands and will live a very happy life with you. Thank you, Weston, for making our daughter so comfortable despite the circumstances. I can see how well matched you are in temperament. That is always the most important foundation for a happy partnership and a lifelong love."

Those last few words sparked a hint of embarrassment in Weston. A lifelong love? Could he dare hope for that? Did he deserve it?

"Thank you for your kind words, though I am not sure that we have quite gotten to that last part yet," he sputtered, suddenly finding the slightly worn wood floor to be fascinating.

Weston did not look up even when he heard Mr. Waynford approach. The man stopped just beside Weston with a bemused chuckle. "I would not be so sure about that." His measured footsteps retreated from the room, leaving Weston alone in the library.

Despite his sudden confusion, Weston's stomach grumbled. The physical world always seemed to choose such strange times to make itself known. With that reminder, Weston also quit the library and made his way upstairs in a stupor. What if what Mr. Waynford had said was true?

His mind wandered back over his time with Beth, especially these last two weeks while her family had been here. With a jolt, Weston felt a deep certainty in his bones. That little spark of hope he had foolishly nurtured and tried to suppress at the same time roared loud and strong. While his new valet helped him change out of his sweaty, grass stained clothes and into a new set for dinner, Weston's more logical side had time to rein in the wild elation that longed to run free. Even if Beth had started to develop real love for him, Weston knew he could not dare to push too far or too fast. That could undo all the quiet work their hearts had done together without either of them realizing it.

Dinner passed in a happy blur, though to Weston's great regret, he did not have much of a chance to speak with Beth. He knew that couples usually did not chat during meals with guests. After all, a husband and wife saw each other every day. Why should they need to talk to each other when they had others to engage with? Even

knowing that logic, Weston could not say that he agreed with it. As much as he enjoyed speaking with the other Waynfords and the Harcourts, and watching Beth with her beloved family, not a moment passed that Weston did not wish he was by her side and hearing all her thoughts and laughter for himself.

"Well, though we are not usually this early to bed, we will need to be early to rise tomorrow morning," Lady Welsted announced in the drawing room after dinner. She sent sharp looks to her younger grandchildren who groaned and grumbled about having to go to bed. That silenced them, and they all slowly filed out of the drawing room, parting where the hallway branched to the guest quarters and the family wing with many melancholy hugs. At least Hugh would be staying with them for another two weeks before returning to Eton from Hannover Grange since it was closer than the Harcourts' home in Somerset. Weston knew that Beth was quite happy about this. Despite their vastly different temperaments, she got on very well with her cousin and he did not mind having a piece of her family with them for a while longer.

As was their tradition, Beth and Weston stopped in the private sitting room that connected their chambers. They paused before their usual chairs situated by the window, looked at each other, and then simultaneously collapsed onto the plush upholstery.

Beth's laughter broke the weary silence first and Weston immediately joined. He did not know how long they simply sat there and laughed together, nor did he care. He had never felt so light or so happy.

The arrival of tea, carried by a startled footman, put an end to their laughter though the atmosphere remained comfortable and jovial. While they slowly sipped their tea, Weston and Beth idly reflected on the success of the visit and how much fun they had all had.

When Beth finished her first cup, she set it back down on the tray. Weston could see the exhaustion setting in. She usually drank at least two or three cups every night before they retired to their separate rooms.

"I think I shall go to bed now, and likely fall asleep the instant my head hits the pillow," she said with a sigh as she stood from her chair.

Weston jumped to his feet, a mad impulse overtaking him. His

heart raced, drowning out all his other senses as he realized that he was about to do exactly what he vowed he would not. He was about to push further than he had ever done before.

One step was all it took to bring them toe to toe. Weston took her small hands in his, threading their fingers together. Beth's eyes slowly drifted up to him, round and expectant. He knew instantly that she sensed this change as well.

"You did a wonderful job organizing this visit, Beth. Just as I knew you would," he said quietly, marveling at the way his breath moved the small hairs along her forehead.

"Thank you. I cannot tell you how much that means to me," she whispered. She was breathing faster now, her eyes darting to Weston's lips before coming back to meet his eyes again.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, Weston's pulse slowed. Every deep, strong beat of his heart told him that this was right. For once, it was right.

"I am so happy that you are happy, dearest Beth. I hope to make you even happier every day for the rest of our lives."

Finally, Weston allowed himself to stop thinking and just acted instead. His hands left hers, cupping her wonderfully soft cheeks, her skin smooth beneath his palms. He leaned forward until his forehead touched hers. "I am so, so lucky to have you as my wife."

Beth sighed, the warm air brushing against Weston's lips. "I am, in fact, the truly lucky one."

Weston could hold himself back no longer. He tilted her face up. Naturally, effortlessly, as if this was always meant to happen, their lips met in a long, deep kiss. Her mouth fit against his so perfectly that Weston thought his heart might explode with happiness, with the certainty of his love for Beth—for the love that he finally thought they might share after all.

After several long moments, mouths moving in perfect unison, Weston finally came up for air. Beth's eyes were still closed, a small smile on her face.

He leaned down again and kissed her forehead. Of course he wanted to keep kissing her—forever, if such a thing could have been humanly possible. It seemed that Beth would not mind that either. Still, Weston managed to remind himself that there would be time for that. An entire lifetime. In many ways, they had only just begun.

“Go rest, darling,” he whispered. Beth looked up at him, eyes full of a longing that Weston wanted nothing more than to fulfill. “There is no need to rush anything. We have all the time in the world to see where this takes us.”

Chapter 13



Just a few days after her family's stay, Beth's skills as a hostess were tested once again. This time, the stakes were higher. It was Weston's family's turn to visit. Though Lord and Lady Shawberry lived just five miles away, Weston's sister and brother-in-law lived in Middlesex. Mrs. Barber and her husband had opted to stay with the baron and baroness, but they had all promised to spend as much time as possible at Hannover Grange with Weston and Beth.

While she was glad that none of them would actually be staying overnight under her roof, Beth's nerves still rattled around inside her. She would have to be ready for a visit at any moment, and she had always known how important it was for a young lady to make a positive impression on her in-laws. They would be in her life forever, after all.

"Do not fret, so," Hugh said with a bemused smile. He watched Beth pace up and down the morning room in the guest wing. "You look lovely, dear Beth, and Lord and Lady Shawberry have always been kind to you. If I may be so bold, I have no doubt that they are so very pleased to have such a lovely lady for their new daughter."

Beth exhaled an unconvinced sigh as she fidgeted with the few modest jewels nestled amongst her dark curls. Unfortunately, she knew the truth about the baron and baroness, which she had not fully shared with her cousin yet. She did not dare confess it now. Knowing Hugh, who already had an unusual disdain for their own class and its oftentimes strange machinations, he would not hold himself back from marching into the drawing room after her and telling them just what he thought of their actions. Lord and Lady Shawberry were certainly nice in many regards—save for when it came to their son's lifelong

wellbeing. “You may always be so bold with such compliments,” Beth chuckled dryly.

Hugh, two years Beth’s junior, offered a knowing smile from his seat by the window. “Then in that case if I may be so bold again, Weston will positively swoon when he sees you.”

Beth’s hands flew to her cheeks. “Hugh! You are going to make me blush.”

The cousins laughed together at Beth’s mild scolding. “You are right, Beth,” Hugh said with a relaxed shrug. “Weston swoons every time he sees you.”

Unable to concoct a response, Beth allowed herself to mull over Hugh’s words while she continued pacing and tugging at various aspects of her attire to ensure everything was in place. She and Weston had not kissed again since her family’s last night at Hannover Grange. True to his word, he never moved faster than Beth was comfortable with. They took everything slowly, almost as if they were truly courting. Beth’s skin tingled with heat when she remembered the little steps they had taken so far since their kiss—more casual touches, meaningful looks, and Weston’s many sweet, loving words.

A rapid knock on the door startled Beth. She rushed to answer it, revealing a footman waiting in the hallway. “Lord and Lady Shawberry’s coach is coming up the drive now, ma’am,” he announced.

“Thank you, Matthew. Hugh, one last check?” Beth walked to the middle of the morning room and held her arms out to her sides. Hugh circled around Beth once, pausing only to point at the gilt buckle that sat at Beth’s waist which she quickly straightened

“Perfect.” Hugh nodded with a proud smile.

“Are you sure you will be content here by yourself?”

“Certainly. Your well-appointed home will provide me with all the entertainment I could need for a few hours on my own. Now, stop stalling and go enjoy your time with your husband’s family.”

With that, Beth raced from the room, throwing her thanks over her shoulder to Hugh. She nearly flew down the stairs, terrified of being late though she knew it would still take some time for the carriage to make it all the way up the long drive. She burst into the drawing room to find Weston already waiting, standing at the window that overlooked part of the wide lawn and their generous gardens in the

distance.

He turned when he heard Beth enter and offered her a comforting yet nervous smile. Beth returned one of her own. They both wanted to make a good impression on his family, especially his judgemental younger sister. Beth forcefully reminded herself that she could not do that as a puddle on the floor.

It was quite difficult to remain upright and in a solid form when Weston looked at her like this. She noticed his lips and remembered their first and only—so far—kiss. She could relive almost every detail of it when she closed her eyes. That single kiss had been better than all her old dreams about what kissing the love of her life would be like.

Weston held his hands out for Beth. She quickly crossed the room and took them. “We should sit down and try to look casual and relaxed when our visitors come in,” he suggested. They settled onto the sofa in the middle of the room. Weston did not let go of Beth’s hand, letting it rest between them against the new upholstery. “It will be fine, I promise.”

Beth nodded, taking a deep breath before smiling at Weston. “I know it will be, because I trust you.”

In a flash, Weston leaned forward and quickly kissed Beth on the cheek. He pulled away, prominent cheekbones tinged pink, just as the drawing room door opened. Beth struggled to gather her thoughts as Mr. Curtis announced Lord and Lady Shawberry and Mr. and Mrs. Barber. Avoiding each other’s eyes, Weston and Beth hurried to the door to greet their visitors.

“Dear Elizabeth, how lovely to see you!” Lady Shawberry cried, offering Beth a polite hug. “You have certainly transformed the room with these new furnishings that Weston told us about. And the artwork you have chosen for the foyer is simply beautiful.”

Beth enjoyed the mixture of modesty and pride her mother-in-law’s words inspired in her. “I am so glad you think so, my lady. Shall we sit and take tea? I am sure you need refreshments after the drive.” She gestured toward the sofa where she and Weston had almost kissed. Lady Shawberry and Mrs. Barber agreed, thanking Beth on the short walk to their seats.

“How was your trip into Oxfordshire, Mrs. Barber?” Beth asked as she poured tea for her guests.

The ladies easily slipped into amiable, mundane chatter as they enjoyed their tea and finger sandwiches while the gentlemen stood by the fireplace in a conversation of their own. Beth's heart still raced the entire time, always fearful of the pleasant atmosphere slipping into a different direction.

"Is that a new set of chairs and table by the window?" Lady Shawberry asked after they had exhausted the topic of travel.

"Indeed, I had that made just for that spot. I thought the light coming in during the afternoon would bring out the dark mahogany and the metal laurel wreath accents in the wood. The green velvet upholstery glows almost emerald when the sun hits it just right," Beth answered eagerly.

Lady Shawberry gave an impressed nod. "I should like to take a closer look." She stood and waved for Beth to follow. Mrs. Barber joined them. The baroness walked around the chairs and table, occasionally leaning down to better observe the finely crafted detail of the furniture. "These pieces are wonderful, Elizabeth. You have quite an eye for these things, and excellent taste."

"Thank you, my lady. It was my great mission upon first arriving here to give the house a refreshed look."

"Hmm, it is quite quaint," Mrs. Barber offered, her eyes and voice chilled.

Beth did not have time to dwell on this and spiral into a panic over what she could've done to upset her sister-in-law. Lady Shawberry continued with her praises. "It seems that you have settled right in at Hannover Grange and taken to your role as mistress quite nicely."

"I found it easy to do since I am so very happy here," Beth answered earnestly. She would have said the same even had it not been for the recent developments between herself and Weston, yet she felt their truth deep in her soul now. And she felt a deep desire to prove to Weston's parents that they did not need to doubt him after all.

"Indeed?" Mrs. Barber asked, her tone almost snide. Beth hesitated to think of it as such, only because she wanted to give her new sister the benefit of the doubt despite what she'd already heard from Weston. The woman rested a hand on her barely protruding stomach, a thin brow lifted as if mocking Beth.

Heat surged into Beth's face. "Of course I am."

Mrs. Barber's gaze lazily drifted over to her own husband. "I am understandably surprised. I have not heard of many marriages that started out this way that were truly happy—unlike those that were forged in love like myself and my dear Geoffrey."

Both Beth and Lady Shawberry stared at Mrs. Barber in shock. Lady Shawberry recovered first, offering an uncomfortable smile to Beth. "Come now, Louise. Did you forget that your own mother and father are from similar circumstances?"

"You and Father are the exception rather than the rule," Mrs. Barber insisted with an unamused half-smile.

Beth wanted nothing more than to fall straight through the floor, and keep falling all the way until she hit the hard ground of the kitchen. She desperately glanced over to Weston. He was partially turned away from her, enjoying his conversation with Lord Shawberry and Mr. Barber. As such, he was blissfully unaware of the mortification Beth currently suffered. She tried to internally rally, reminding herself that she must grow used to this sort of thing eventually. She could not rely on Weston to rescue her from every awkward conversation.

"Louise…" Lady Shawberry mumbled, a surprising bite in her words.

Mrs. Barber looked at Beth—properly for the first time that day, Beth realized. "Forgive me, sister. My condition causes so many wild and unexpected emotions."

Beth recognized the apology as fake. She accepted it regardless, praying with all her might that they could leave this humiliating business behind.

"My poor Louise," Lady Shawberry cooed, gently patting her daughter's cheek. "This is such a trying time, but you will persevere, and the gift you receive at the end will be more than worth it. Have you been experiencing any other symptoms of late?"

As any expectant grandmother would do, Lady Shawberry eagerly latched onto the new subject. The two ladies talked about Mrs. Barber's unborn child and pregnancy, leaving Beth to her own devices.

Though she tried her best to listen like a good hostess, Beth could not stop repeating Mrs. Barber's words in her mind. She knew many would consider her marriage to be inferior or at least pitiful because of its origins. Embarrassment gnawed at her again for the first time in

weeks. That terrible little nagging feeling that she thought she had finally banished returned to a dark corner of Beth's mind. What if she was truly missing out on her real love? How could she know that these affections that had been building for Weston were genuine or simply arose because she had no other choice and paraded themselves as love to help her feel better?

The thought had barely formed before Beth crushed it, angry at herself for doubting the wonderful progress they had made recently. She glanced over to Weston, seeking comfort. She always felt more at ease just by looking at him.

Mrs. Barber's thoughtless words did not belong in her mind, Beth decided forcefully. She knew, with more certainty than she had ever known anything, that she had unexpectedly found the best match she could have hoped for.

Chapter 14

During their almost three months of marriage, Weston and Beth had worked out something of a schedule. Once a week, Weston made the journey to his parents' home, Shawberry Place, to spend an uninterrupted day with them. This also gave Beth her own private time—a necessity for his introverted wife, Weston had quickly learned.

Today, Weston met Mother and Father out in their small tea garden where they were already waiting for him. They greeted him cheerfully, Mother wrapping her arms around him and Father giving him a jovial slap on the back.

"You act as though you did not see me at Hannover Grange just a few days ago," Weston chuckled, settling into a wrought iron chair. He peered around the tea garden with a curious frown. "Where are Louise and Geoffrey?"

"They are visiting one of Louise's old childhood friends nearby," Father answered.

"I see," Weston muttered. He did not bother to hide the irritation in his voice. Since she had married and moved away, Weston had not seen much of his younger sister. He had assumed that she would make an effort to spend time with him while she was staying at Shawberry Place.

"Oh, forgive her, Weston," Mother chided between sips. "You know Louise has always been independent. Besides, she likes showing off her husband and talking about the excitement of impending motherhood."

Weston allowed himself another brief moment of sulking. This was just like Louise to think of no one but herself. It was just like his

parents to make excuses for her. Then, as quickly as it came, he let the frustration slip away. He had heard enough of her haughty marriage advice and her opinions on the decrepit—according to her—Hannover Grange during their visit the other day.

"Very well then. I am sure I will see her some other time since she will be here for another month yet." Weston shrugged as he piled his plate with biscuits. He knew by now when to let such things go. "And how have you been since last I saw you?"

They soon settled into a comfortable conversation which was mostly repeated from their recent visit. Mother and Father were all smiles as they chattered away. Weston was happy to see them both so happy. He had caused them enough grief. With how well things had been going with Beth, he hoped to only cause them even greater happiness from now on despite the grief they had nearly caused him. They had gone about it in the wrong way, but Weston knew that they had ultimately wanted to help. Considering how hopeless he himself had felt at that time, he could not completely blame them for their actions. As he and Beth grew closer, fell deeper for each other, he could show them that he wasn't a lost cause incapable of finding love after all.

"But enough about us. How is lovely Elizabeth doing?" Mother asked eventually. Weston was not surprised that she would inquire after Beth. She adored her new daughter-in-law. Her furtive glance in Weston's direction made him curious, however.

"She is very well." He left it at that, wondering if the simplicity of his statement could draw his mother out a bit more. Indeed, the baroness almost dipped forward in relief. Weston leaned back in his chair, setting his teacup down. "Why do you look so nervous, Mother?"

The woman sighed and shook her head. "You are too perceptive for your own good."

Weston continued to watch Mother, awaiting an answer. He bit back the retort that longed to spring to his lips. He was not necessarily too perceptive. She was simply painfully obvious at times. When she tried to wait out his silence, Weston tilted his head to the side expectantly.

"I was worried that Louise's words the other day when we were at Hannover Grange had upset her terribly," she finally confessed.

Weston's brows creased in confusion. Beth had not breathed a word of discomfort to him. "What precisely did Louise say?"

Mother chewed on the corner of her bottom lip and avoided making eye contact with Weston. One long gloved finger absentmindedly slipped through the handle of her teacup, turning it this way and that. She glanced at Father who simply shrugged. He clearly knew nothing about this matter and was not keen to get involved.

"I will not let this go so you might as well speak," Weston nudged, trying to keep his voice lighthearted despite the anxiety rising up in him.

With a pout, Mother gave in. "Louise said some…thoughtless things. Her condition, you know, muddles the brain."

"Go on."

"She said that your marriage was disingenuous because of the circumstances which brought it about. But she apologized quickly and your dear Elizabeth handled the situation with such grace," Mother added in a hurry when she saw Weston's expression, aghast and hurt.

He desperately wished now that he had not told his family the truth, that his proposal to Beth had been one of necessity rather than love to avoid a fate with that wretched Miss Cottsriff. It had not felt right to deceive them, though he had still waited until after the wedding to reveal everything. His parents had easily accepted it, simply happy that he had finally married.

Louise's attitude did not surprise him. She had always looked down her nose at others—especially Weston. Since she was the first to marry, she considered herself to be an expert at the entire institution. Beth's reaction also did not surprise Weston. She was the very definition of grace, patience, and understanding, even in the face of such ugly words. He only wished that he could've known in the moment and come to her aid. Such a situation would have been difficult for anyone to bear, especially such a gentle soul like Beth.

Father cleared his throat and leaned across the small round table. "Do not pay too much mind to their gossip, son. We are so thrilled that you managed to find someone yourself, regardless of how it came about. And of course we are thrilled that you do seem happy together after all."

Despite his father's reassuring smile, the words still stung at that

deep, sensitive corner in Weston's heart. Without realizing it, over the years he had let his parents' assumptions about him and his prospects dwindle his self-worth down to almost nothing. He was happy now, far happier than he had thought possible even just a few months ago when he had nearly accepted Miss Cottsriff at their urging. It seemed those old hurts were not as easily glossed over as he had thought.

Weston nodded and took an awkward sip of his tea, half regretting his natural inclination to pry. In one breath, he was so eternally grateful to Beth for marrying him, for providing him an escape, and for allowing him to come closer bit by bit over these last few months. In the next, he remembered why Beth had chosen him in the first place—out of her own fears of an uncertain future. After feeling Beth's heart opening up to him, after sharing a life with her, after sharing a kiss, Weston had finally allowed himself to put those thoughts out of his mind. Until now.

"I appreciate both your concern and your joy. All is well now. Very well indeed," he managed to mumble. "Now, tell me about this issue with the stablemaster you mentioned the other day, Father."

Thankfully, Weston's parents easily followed his change of subject. He only half listened as Mother and Father went back and forth over this matter with the stablemaster, who had been reported by the other grooms in the stable to prefer allowing everyone else to do his work while taking the credit for it. He was vaguely aware of Mother wanting to fire the stablemaster immediately or at least pressure him into an early retirement and Father wanting to give him another chance since the man had been stablemaster since his own boyhood.

That all seemed so inconsequential to Weston when the guilt he thought he had neatly packed away came rushing back to life. For every pinch that told Weston that he had stolen something from Beth, he forcefully reminded himself that she truly seemed happy with him.

If she wasn't, why would she have kissed him back with such sweet passion? Even though they had not kissed again yet, that must indicate that her feelings were growing, slowly but surely.

Tea finished with Weston none the wiser. His mind was far too occupied now to have any more than minimal awareness of his surroundings, his company, or the conversation that flowed around him. The rest of the day included some card games in the drawing room, a simple lunch, listening to Mother play the pianoforte, and

maintaining a half-hearted conversation with Father about general estate upkeep for both Shawberry Place and Hannover Grange. All the while, Weston tried to beat back his anxiety.

It only grew worse during the ride home as his mind turned over what Mother had revealed to him about Louise's cruel words to Beth. The thought of Beth waiting at home for him almost made him tell the barouche's driver to send the horses into a gallop.

When he did finally arrive, Weston took the stairs two at a time, desperate to see his wife—to see if he could discern any doubt that his rampant hopes might have masked. He paused in the hallway outside their sitting room door, praying that she had not yet gone to sleep or was spending time with Hugh in some other part of the house he had not thought to check first.

Slowly, Weston opened the door. Beth had waited up for him after all. At least, she had tried to. Weston's heart swelled as he took her in, hand propped up against the window and a book still open in her lap. She had fallen asleep while awaiting his return. He had never seen something so precious, and she was all his.

He tiptoed across the room and stood just before her, eyes wandering over her slumbering form. Somehow, she looked even more angelic than she usually did, which was indeed saying something. Weston had thought to himself on more than one occasion that the classics could be repainted with Beth's face on every angel floating down from the heavens or bestowing their blessings upon average and wounded men like him.

Beth sighed in her sleep, shifting uncomfortably without waking. Even that sound was melodic to Weston's ears. He reached down and slipped the book away from her, then sank to one knee before her. Her brows twitched and Weston noticed a strand of hair that had come loose along her forehead, tickling her soft skin. With cautious fingers, he brushed the hair back, allowing himself to stroke her lovely dark brown locks for a moment. His hand trailed down, resting on her cheek. His thumb brushed against it, tender and careful, as if she were the rarest jewel in the world.

"Beth, my dear, you have to wake up just for a moment. You will be much more comfortable in your own bed," he whispered in her ear.

The still sleeping Beth pursed her lips together and turned her shoulder toward Weston. He repeated himself. She frowned, and

Weston fell in love with that look. He only wished that he could see it every morning when she clung to sleep, that he could learn more about these little things that made her who she was. So Beth was not easy to wake. What else had Weston not yet discovered about his wife?

"How was your day, Weston?" she asked in an endearingly raspy voice, blinking up at him slowly. She sat up with a groan and massaged her neck.

"It was just fine. I did not see my sister since she had gone to visit a friend even though she knew I was coming to visit."

At the mention of Louise, Beth swallowed and looked around the room. That only served to remind Weston all over again what Mother had told him. He deeply regretted bringing up his sister. This sweet, intimate moment had been shattered. And now that it was on his mind, Weston surprisingly found that he wanted to address it.

"My mother told me what Louise said when they came to visit us a few days ago," he confessed, dropping his gaze to Beth's book which he still held in his hand. "I am so sorry for her rudeness."

Beth snapped her attention back to Weston. Now she looked both uncomfortable and guilty. "Please do not worry. It was nothing so terrible." Her hands balled into fists on her lap. She clearly did not want to continue this conversation.

The anxiety twisting Weston's heart forced him to push a little more. "Are you really happy, though?"

A soft smile eased Beth's expression. "I very much am." She reached up and took Weston's other hand, removing it from her cheek. She nestled it in both of hers and pressed it to her chest over her heart.

Before Weston could dissolve into happiness and relief, his nervous mind thought it saw a flash of something in Beth's eyes, something he did not like. She squeezed his hand and the odd moment passed.

Beth stood, pulling Weston up with her. "We should go to sleep now. Or return to sleep, in my case."

"An excellent idea," Weston chuckled. The weight of everything he had learned today, and of the torment his anxiety put him through, hit Weston all at once. It sat on his shoulders like a pair of stone wings, threatening to tether him to the earth forever.

Beth took a step toward her door, allowing her hand to slip out of

Weston's. He made his way to his own door on the opposite side of the sitting room. When he opened it, he paused and looked over his shoulder, watching as Beth slipped into her bedroom. She did not look back at him.

Chapter 15



The carriage rolled up to the modest front door of Mr. and Mrs. Lew's house. Beth clutched Weston's hand, and he could feel both her nerves and excitement. Weston shared an understanding smile with Hugh, who sat across from the couple. They both understood Beth's anxiety before social functions.

Mr. and Mrs. Lew had paid a bride visit shortly after Beth and Weston had arrived at Hannover Grange. Beth liked them very much since Mrs. Lew had given her some very helpful advice on continuing to manage Mrs. Sharpe and reducing conflict among the older and newer staff. They had eagerly accepted this recent invitation to a dinner at their home, which had thoughtfully included Hugh. Weston also knew that Beth was looking forward to having a break from doing her own hosting and enjoying someone else's event despite her natural inclination toward apprehension.

The Lews' butler led the three of them upstairs and opened the drawing room door with a flourish. "Mr. and Mrs. Weston Quincy and Mr. Hugh Harcourt," he announced as the couple walked in followed by their own guest. Weston greeted the room with a warm smile, though admittedly not because he was overly joyful to be in their presence. He simply loved the sound of Mr. and Mrs. Weston Quincy.

He glanced at Beth from the corner of his eye, wondering how she felt about being introduced as his wife. They had not talked much about their conversation the other day after Weston's visit with his parents. He knew that Beth did not like to linger on such unpleasant topics, and he respected her wishes despite his desire for clarification and comfort. Thus, over the last couple days, he found himself swinging steadily like a pendulum between trusting the growing

closeness between them and fearing the worst.

The tightness in Weston's chest, which he had not noticed until that moment, eased when he saw his beautiful wife smiling into the room, perfectly content.

"Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Quincy, Mr. Harcourt," the hostess Mrs. Lew called as she hurried over to the new arrivals. She gave Beth a polite hug and then stood beside her, one arm stretched before them as if putting them on display. "My friends, as you just heard, this is Mr. and Mrs. Quincy. They are the newest newlyweds in our fine little town. Do they not make such a handsome couple? And Mrs. Quincy's cousin is staying with them until he returns to Eton."

The other guests, many of whom Weston knew from growing up in Shawberry, murmured their agreements and greetings. Beth shrank into his side, always a touch uncomfortable with being the center of attention. Weston savored the moment. He was honored to be able to offer a source of strength and comfort to his wife. That alone must mean that she trusted him, if nothing else.

When everyone returned to their conversations, Mrs. Lew came around to Weston's side. She patted his shoulder with a warm smile. "Since you are familiar with just about everyone here, I hope you do not mind if I steal your lovely wife for a moment to make some more introductions with other ladies of the area she might not have had a chance to meet yet. Please do the same for Mr. Harcourt."

Of course Weston wanted to tell Mrs. Lew that he would prefer to keep Beth selfishly by his side for the entire evening—and for the rest of time, truth be told. Instead, he turned to Beth. "If my wife is agreeable to it, certainly."

Still unsure, Beth looked up at Weston. He leaned down slightly to bring his lips closer to her ear. "Do not worry, darling. Everyone here is very kind."

Indeed, as soon as they had stepped in, Weston had cast his gaze about the room to inspect the guests. To his relief, Mrs. Newford and Miss Saunders were not in attendance.

Warmth filled Weston from head to toe when Beth gave a relieved smile. She knew that her husband would always look after her and provide his help when she needed it.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lew. That is very kind of you. I would greatly appreciate it if you could introduce me to your guests," Beth said with

a hint of nerves in her voice.

Mrs. Lew pressed a hand over her heart as she looked between Beth and Weston. “Oh my goodness, you two are just so sweet. Come now, Mrs. Quincy, this way.”

The older woman took Beth by the arm and whisked her away. Beth sent one last look to Weston over her shoulder. He gave an encouraging nod. He had no doubt that Beth would handle herself with poise, just as she always did despite her anxiety. Once she finally settled into the rhythm of a conversation no one would have guessed that she was often shy and worried about making positive impressions. To those who didn’t know her like Weston did, it would appear to be the most natural thing in the world for her. Everyone always found her to be wonderfully charming. That was just one of the many, many things Weston admired about his wife. She did her best, even in situations that challenged her.

He watched for another moment as Mrs. Lew paraded her new neighbor to her other guests, lavishing praises upon Beth which made the younger woman blush and insist that her hostess was too generous. Once he felt sure that Beth was in good hands, Weston and Hugh wandered over to a group of familiar men standing by the fireplace. They all greeted their old acquaintance and the new gentleman happily when they approached.

“Thank you for inviting us tonight, Mr. Lew,” Weston offered to the host.

“Indeed,” Mr. Harcourt added with a charming smile. “Though I am only here a short while, it is wonderful to feel like I am part of your community already.”

The older man patted Weston on the shoulder and nodded toward Hugh. “Of course, of course. Any guest of our neighbors’ is welcome in our home. Besides, my wife is rather taken with your bride, Mr. Quincy. She says she has never met a more polite, agreeable girl.”

Weston laughed with Mr. Lew as they both looked over to their wives, still making the rounds through the room. “I can certainly see that. I do hope that Mrs. Lew will return my wife to me at the end of the evening.”

“Have no fear, my friend. I will make sure Mrs. Lew does just that —though it might be a struggle,” Mr. Lew chuckled.

After personally greeting the other gentlemen, the group resumed

its previous conversation. Normally, Weston had no trouble participating. Tonight, he found himself remaining quiet most of the time, passively listening instead. The talk of the upcoming hunting season did not appeal much to him this year, not when he had such a wonderful woman in his life now who consumed every waking thought. Hugh, on the other hand, jumped right in, keeping the other mens' focus on getting to know the newcomer.

He let their voices fade into the background as he kept his eyes on Beth. She mingled with the other guests, looking more at ease by the moment. He would have continued to do so until one of the other gentlemen finally managed to steal his attention.

"Mr. Quincy? Will you be doing any hunting on your own property or will you go to Lord Shawberry's estate?" Mr. Graham asked.

Weston offered an apologetic smile. "I must confess I have not given it much thought yet."

The men all looked at each other knowingly. Lord Whitaker from Oversham, the next town over, gave him a playful smack on the arm. "Yes, we understand. We were all newlyweds once ourselves. It is perfectly normal to constantly want to stare at one's wife."

"You should enjoy it while you can before your wives end up looking like mine," said Mr. Elworth with a dry laugh.

A few of the other older gentlemen nodded in bemused agreement. Hugh's expression went blank in what Weston could only guess was his best attempt at masking his real reaction to such a crude statement. Weston only gave a tight-lipped smile. He had never much liked when other men made jokes of their marriages, especially since he knew Mr. Elworth's wife was a perfectly lovely lady. Besides, wasn't there more to a lifelong companionship than outward appearance? Weston longed to point out that Mr. Elworth himself had not exactly aged gracefully, so he did not understand why the older man should expect his wife to remain as youthful looking as possible into her sixties. Luckily for them all, Weston managed to restrain himself.

"Really now, Mr. Elworth," Mr. Lew said with a sharp chuckle. "That is simply the sign of a long, happy marriage."

It was Weston's turn to offer him agreement and support of Mr. Lew's statement, nodding perhaps a tad too vigorously.

The other man's eyes snapped to Weston and he shrugged. "You

will understand what I mean someday."

Weston's restraint went up in smoke. He could no longer remain silent. He looked Mr. Elworth directly in the eyes, straightened his spine, and pulled his shoulders back.

"I for one am greatly looking forward to watching how my wife and I both transform over the years, regardless of how she looks at her present age or hopefully long into her eighties and beyond, if we are so blessed. I think she will always be the most beautiful woman I have ever seen and I pray that she lives long enough for a head full of white hair and a face full of lines that will tell the story of everything we have weathered over the decades."

A few other men, including Hugh, offered their agreement with Weston. Mr. Elworth did not look terribly pleased to have someone so openly refute his opinion. Mr. Lew quickly tried to smooth over the situation with a joke about every marriage being as different as the men and women inside them and then returned to the subject of hunting.

"Is your neighbor always so degrading toward his own wife?" Hugh whispered into Weston's ear while the other men were distracted.

Weston grimaced. "More so as time goes on, it seems. He must not like confronting his own aging so he projects it onto poor Mrs. Elworth."

The younger man shook his head. "Why fret over something that is bound to come for us all and then judge others for that same fate? But I admire your quick thinking and your commitment to your viewpoint." He smiled at Weston, approval in his eyes. "I will be sure to pass on your valiant defense to my cousin."

"Thank you, though I did not say all that so it would make its way back to Beth. I meant every word."

Hugh put a strong hand on Weston's shoulder. "I know you did."

"Mr. Harcourt, how is hunting in Somerset? I must confess I have not had the pleasure of being in the area during hunting season." Mr. Lew turned to Hugh, mindful to keep his new acquaintance in the loop of the conversation.

"Hunting in Somerset is such a thrill," Hugh started after giving Weston a knowing lift of his brow.

This left Weston free to observe Beth once more. He scanned the

room and when his eyes landed upon her, he first noticed her sweet smile and light laughter that he adored so much. Then he noticed her conversation partner. Weston's jaw twitched.

Mr. Jeremy Mills. How did Weston not notice him earlier? That man did have a way of remaining in the background until he chose to reveal himself to his intended targets. At present, Beth seemed to be one.

Weston had always been a little jealous of the perpetual bachelor who was in all likelihood probably a rake. He had been born and raised in the area and had effortlessly wooed all the local young ladies before Weston ever had a chance. Because there was no concrete evidence of any illicit activities, he had not been banned from polite society.

And Weston's wife was currently chatting with him. Weston forced his jaw to relax. Any uncomfortable feelings he had toward Mr. Mills no longer mattered. Weston was happily married now and nothing could change that. At least, he prayed with everything in his heart every day that nothing would change it.

That was just Beth being her usual kind self. Weston had absolutely no doubts that she would remain faithful—even if she wasn't happy. The thought wrenched Weston's heart. No, Beth would never seek love outside of their marriage, no matter how miserable she was inside it. Beth was a good, loyal woman who would always respect their vows.

That did not necessarily mean that others would not try. Weston noticed the way Mr. Mills looked at Beth. She was beautiful and kind and endearing, after all. It was not necessarily a sin to notice that someone else's wife was pretty or an enjoyable conversationalist. Weston felt a familiar pinch of guilt. It told him that he was being ridiculous. Neither of them had technically done anything wrong. It was natural for guests to get to know one another at a dinner party.

To Weston's relief, the butler chose that precise moment to announce dinner. He excused himself from the group of gentlemen and rushed across the room to Beth with Mr. Harcourt trailing behind him.

"Good evening, Mr. Quincy. Mr. Harcourt, was it?" Mr. Mills said in an offhand manner when Weston approached, still not removing his eyes from Beth. At least Beth gave Weston that pure, loving smile that

he had come to know over the past few months. Despite his own insecurities, he knew she would never look at Mr. Mills like that.

"Mrs. Quincy, Mr. Mills, oh how perfect." The guests turned to see Mrs. Lew, busy instructing everyone on the entry order. "I thought the two of you could go in together since you will be seated beside each other. Mr. Quincy, you can escort Miss Coldwell. Mr. Harcourt can take Miss Farrell."

Weston swallowed the lump in his throat. He had been hoping that Mrs. Lew would seat Beth with just about anyone but Mr. Mills. Yet the hostess' word was law. With a devilishly handsome smile, Mr. Mills offered his arm to Beth and she politely looped her arm around Mr. Mills'. He led Beth away.

"He seems to be an interesting fellow," Hugh said with a thoughtful frown as he watched his cousin walk away with Mr. Mills.

"He is the arrogant type who woos any woman whether she is single, courting, engaged, or married," Weston spat, his dislike of the man welling up inside him, egged on by his own insecurities.

Hugh wrinkled his nose. "Are there many such men like that? In fact, I think I know the answer. I am sure some of the fellows I know at Eton will turn into Mr. Mills in a few years' time." He gave Weston an encouraging smile. "But that is of no matter tonight. You know Beth only has eyes for you."

"Mr. Harcourt?"

"Ah, yes, I shall be escorting you tonight, Miss Farrell."

"Good evening, Mr. Quincy. Shall we join the rest in the dining room?" Weston's own partner, Miss Coldwell, appeared beside him. He nodded and thrust out his arm for the young lady to take. The two pairs were the last to enter the dining room.

Though Hugh's words were meant to be comforting, Weston could not help entertaining that earlier thought. Hugh did not know the whole story of his cousin's marriage so he had made that statement under the assumption that they had loved each other from the start. What if Weston had stolen Beth from the true love of her life after all? While it might not have been Mr. Mills, seeing her with him had reminded Weston that such a man could still exist out there for her. Could Beth's true love be someone else even if she was Weston's? Both realizations filled him with a new level of remorse he had not known possible. Such heavy thoughts would make dinner a rather morose

affair.

Chapter 16

A telltale chill had settled in the air, promising autumn just around the corner. Beth and Weston walked arm in arm through the gardens of Hannover Grange. She had said since her arrival that she wanted to spend more time out here and perhaps gather ideas for new flowers or new arrangements that could be implemented in the spring. This was their first real opportunity to do so after months of near constant activity and focusing on the house's interior upgrades.

Unfortunately, Beth's mind was occupied by other considerations.

"Well, what do you think?" Weston asked after several minutes of silence.

Beth looked around at the garden with its neat rows upon rows of mostly dormant flower bushes surrounded by an impressive circular hedge that enclosed it all. "In truth, it is already beautiful and lovingly maintained. I am not sure there is anything I want to change. Though perhaps an iron archway on both ends would be more inviting."

Weston looked from the front of the garden to the back, nodding thoughtfully. "Another very astute suggestion. You always have such a vision for these things."

Beth offered a quick smile before slipping into silence again. No matter how hard she tried to enjoy the last few blooms clinging to the garden before autumn set in, her mind always somehow wandered back to last night's dinner at the Lews' home. In particular, she thought about Mr. Mills.

She was quite positive that he had been flirting with her all evening. Having had numerous suitors during her Seasons, Beth felt reasonably confident that she knew what it looked like when men took an interest in her. Apparently, that did not stop even when she

was introduced as Mrs. Quincy.

The thought made her skin crawl as a cool breeze caressed her. It did not sit well with her that a man would try to flirt with a married woman. Beth was not naïve, however. She knew such things could and did happen, though she always tried to ignore such gossip whenever she heard it.

Another gust made her shiver again, this time with guilt. How could she think of another man showing interest in her while she walked through a beautiful garden on her husband's arm? Despite the slight chill, Beth pulled away from Weston and lengthened her strides to put distance between them, feigning interest in a cluster of reddish purple dahlias at the edge of the garden up ahead. Suddenly being so close to Weston felt almost painful. She bent down, closed her eyes, and breathed in the uniquely sweet scent of the hardy flowers that didn't mind a bit of autumn, hoping that it would somehow wash away her thoughts.

Instead, when Beth opened her eyes, the lovely dahlias only reminded her of something else from last night. After dinner, the ladies had retired to the drawing room and the gentlemen remained in the dining room for their port. Well-meaning Mrs. Lew had noticed the attention Beth had received from Mr. Mills.

"Yes, that young man does enjoy endearing himself to you young ladies," she had gently teased. "You are just lovelier than a flower in full bloom, dear Mrs. Quincy. I am sure you must have been very popular during your Seasons. In fact, I would wager that you could simply look at a gentleman and claim his heart if you wanted. But those days are over now for us married ladies. We claimed the hearts of the right men, though it is fun to reminisce on that exciting period every now and again."

Beth snapped back up, straight and rigid. Those harmless words rang in her ears. She had been popular, hadn't she? At least she had not had any trouble finding men to court her. Was Mrs. Lew right? Could she have truly had any man she wanted? After all, the problem had been entirely with Beth. She had not felt any deep connections with her suitors after the first few meetings so she had written them off, even if she continued to see them for weeks after. If she had given them more of a chance, would they have offered for her?

Her stays suddenly felt too tight, the thick fabric of her floral

walking dress too heavy. A guilty longing tugged at the corner of her mind. Having been reminded of that feeling—a new man and a new potential—Beth found that she almost missed it. She missed that unknown possibility of what could be.

For the first time in months, after a cruel comment from her sister-in-law and some good-natured teasing from a neighbor, Beth had once again started to wonder about the opportunities she had missed by choosing this path.

She was so preoccupied, eyes still fixated on the dahlias, that she did not hear Weston's boots crunching on the gravel walkway behind her until it was too late. She stiffened when his arm slipped around her waist.

"These dahlias have always reminded me of you," he said gently, his cheek against her temple. "They are soft, beautiful, layered, and I never grow tired of spending time in their company."

In one instant, Beth longed to ease into his touch, to absorb his sweet and comforting words. In the next, she recoiled with shame. She stepped to the side so quickly that she almost turned her ankle. She lifted an arm to block Weston from grabbing her and swept her hands across the front of her dress as she righted herself. Her heart lurched when she looked up and saw confusion and pain in Weston's expression.

"Thank you for that lovely compliment," she said awkwardly before hurrying away to examine some other late blooming flowers, her back to Weston.

Had she ever experienced such an intense guilt, a guilt that threatened to tear her in half? Beth bit the inside of her cheek so hard she winced. What business did she have missing those old days of courtship? How could she be so foolish when her husband was such a wonderful man who clearly thought the world of her?

She anxiously waited for the sound of Weston's footsteps following after her. He did not move. He must have been surprised into stillness by Beth's behavior. It stung Beth to think that for once he might not want to come near her. She had grown so used to his constant comforting presence—a presence she did not deserve if she allowed these old thoughts to consume her. Beth longed to let them go, to return to that time of their lovely kiss when things had finally seemed so simple. Yet somehow she had managed to find new ways to

complicate her own feelings.

~

UNSURE OF WHAT else to do, Weston fell back while Beth floated about the garden. He had never seen her act so strangely, as if she could not bear to be near him. The thought hurt in a deep, profound place, all too close to that tender spot his heart had been nurturing ever since their kiss.

While he lamely followed after Beth, Weston's thoughts constantly returned to one explanation: the dinner party. Had something happened that he had not been aware of? The possibilities that ran through his mind sent a painful, guilty tremble down his spine. He watched Beth for a moment as her gentle fingers absentmindedly stroked a few vibrant green leaves. If something had happened, he needed to know what it was so they could work through it together as a husband and wife should.

Whatever was happening, Weston would not allow it to drive an even greater wedge between them. He trotted up behind Beth and gently grasped her elbow, turning her to face him. "Beth, please tell me truthfully. Did Mr. Mills talking to you last night make you uncomfortable?"

Her eyes widened in surprise, though Weston could not tell what exactly had surprised her about the question. "No, of course not," she insisted quickly. "Mr. Mills was a perfect gentleman. He didn't do or say anything inappropriate. My mind has just been lost in the clouds today."

With a less than convincing smile, Beth tried to leave Weston behind again. He did not let her go, keeping his hand around her arm —just enough for her to realize that he was not yet ready to end the conversation. Her eyes darted from the hand that clutched her to Weston's face. His stomach sank. There was something she was not telling him.

He leaned down, bringing his face closer to hers. He desperately wanted to make everything right, to put Beth at ease. He never wanted her to suffer for any reason, especially if he could help it. That included this moment.

"You can tell me anything, Beth. If anything is bothering or

upsetting you, we can fix it together. Or I can simply listen if you only want space to air out your thoughts."

"I know." Beth gave a reserved smile.

Her simple response did not make Weston feel any better. His eyes fell to her perfect rosy lips. As much as he wanted to kiss her, to show her the depth of his feelings in a more tangible way, he reminded himself to hold back. Now was not the time to push. Instead, he brought his lips to her forehead.

Beth yanked herself away, almost stumbling for the second time that day in her rush to escape Weston. "I am sure I am terribly sweaty from the heat of the day," she mumbled weakly as she whirled around to put her back to him once more.

Weston's heart cracked. He had done the exact opposite of what he had hoped. He had only managed to make Beth feel more uncomfortable. So much so that she had recoiled from his kiss, that she could not bear to look at him.

They spent the remainder of their time in the garden walking separately. When Beth said that she wished to return to Hannover Grange, Weston let her go without him. Perhaps pushing had not been the right tactic. Perhaps she just needed some time to herself and her thoughts. Weston vowed to give it to her.

Until then, he had no doubt that his mind would plague him with the horrible possibility that perhaps she had finally started to regret him after all.



"Mrs. Quincy, there is a guest waiting for you in the drawing room," Mr. Curtis announced the moment Beth walked into the back foyer. She stared blankly at the butler until he lifted a curious brow. She forced herself to shake her head, to at least attempt to clear the disturbing thoughts that had clouded her mind during the garden walk.

"Thank you, Mr. Curtis. Who is it?"

"Mr. Mills, ma'am."

The name sent a chill through Beth's body from head to toe that had nothing to do with the encroaching autumn. She offered a tight smile to Mr. Curtis. Of course, the poor man could not have known that Mr. Mills was the last person she wanted to see right now. "I will go visit my guest then."

"Do you wish to have tea sent up?"

"No, that will not be necessary. I do not think it will be a long visit." At least, she prayed she would be rid of him quickly somehow. She prayed that she would be able to think of some excuse on the spot. Beth had never been good at that sort of thing, but even a flimsy excuse and the possibility of offending the gentleman seemed better than entertaining him for any length of time. That would only give him ideas, ideas that Beth knew he would expand into far grander encouragements than she ever intended.

She raced upstairs, not caring about her wind tossed hair or her plain cream walking dress. She did not even give herself a chance to hesitate outside the drawing room door. Even the footman did not have time to open it for her as she barged right in.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Mills."

The gentleman stood from his perch on the sofa, a lazy half-smile gracing what Beth figured were very appealing features to the other ladies he flirted with. “Mrs. Quincy, a pleasure to see you again.”

Beth forced herself to keep her expression neutral. He said this as though they had run into each other in town when he had deliberately come all the way to Hannover Grange to see her specifically.

“You must be looking for my husband,” she said with a slight emphasis on the last word, hoping to redirect him from the true nature of his unexpected and unwelcome visit.

“Oh, no,” Mr. Mills chuckled, an arrogant glint in his eyes. “I have known Mr. Quincy for many years now. I have no need to speak with him. You, on the other hand… I greatly enjoyed our conversation last night and hoped we could continue.”

Beth took a step back even though Mr. Mills had not come any closer. His mere presence wanted to send her flying from the room. Where was that blasted excuse when she needed one?

“Is that so? Even though we primarily conversed about the winter festivals that will be taking place in Shawberry? You are too generous, sir.”

Mr. Mills smiled down at his feet in a faux bashful manner. “You have caught me out, Mrs. Quincy. I did want to learn more about you —about the woman Mr. Quincy somehow managed to snatch all to himself.” His eyes darted up to meet Beth’s once more, half-lidded and unable to hide his less than pure motives.

That was the final straw for Beth. Despite the confusion in her own heart, she knew perfectly well that she wanted nothing to do with this man. She did not want that attention any longer. “Goodness, I just realized that I really should freshen up before entertaining guests. If you don’t mind, I will return shortly after I catch my breath. I was just out walking in the garden with my husband, you see.” She spun around on her toes and marched for the drawing room door in a few quick steps. Thankfully she had not made it very far into the room.

“And you returned home without him? Interesting,” Mr. Mills drawled just as Beth slipped back out into the hallway. His words propelled her upstairs not to her own quarters, but to the guest wing. She hated to admit that he had hit on something all too real, though he could not have actually guessed what. He simply wanted to prod where he was not wanted, searching for weak spots he could take

advantage of. Beth would not allow that.

"Hugh, I need your help," she declared as soon as she threw the door of the guest wing's sitting room open.

"Good Heaven, I can see that." Hugh leapt up from his chair, tossing his book down onto the cushion as he crossed the room in a few long strides. He stared down at Beth expectantly.

"Mr. Mills, that gentleman from last night. Do you remember him?"

The young man's upper lip curled. "I certainly do. I did not have a very good feeling about him and according to Weston, he is not exactly an upstanding gentleman if rumors are to be believed."

"I believe the rumors. He flirted with me incessantly last night despite knowing that I am a married woman. And he has taken it upon himself to have a private meeting with me in the drawing room."

"Mr. Mills is here? Now?" Hugh almost shouted, eyes widening while his brows dove into a sharp point between them.

"Yes, unfortunately."

"And you wish for me to banish him for you, cousin? But where is Weston?"

"More or less, yes. Politely, of course. Say I was suddenly overcome by a fainting spell from too much walking. Weston is likely still out in the garden and I earnestly hope that they do not cross paths. I can tell they do not hold each other in high regard."

A mischievous grin spread across Hugh's face. "It would be my pleasure."

He wasted no time in undertaking his mission, leaving Beth to sink down onto the chair Hugh had occupied and await his return. She idly flipped back and forth through the pages of the book he'd left behind without actually reading anything. Luckily, Hugh returned in short order, a triumphant smirk on his face.

"Mr. Mills is gone, and I have reason to believe that he will not be returning for a long, long while," he announced, head held high and chest puffed out.

Beth instantly deflated and allowed her shoulders to sag in a very unladylike fashion. Having grown up together, she did not particularly care if her cousin witnessed less than perfect behavior. Heaven knew they had seen each other in their fair share of messes throughout the years, from a fall in a puddle that had soaked a mortified young Beth

to more than one broken bone and piteous wails of agony from Hugh.

"I hope you were not too rude," she mumbled listlessly. In truth, she was no longer sure that she cared what method Hugh had used as long as it got the job done, and it seemed that it had. "And I am afraid I lost your page." She lifted the book she had been fiddling with with an apologetic smile.

Hugh shrugged and sat in the chair beside Beth. He took the book from her and tossed it down on the table between them a tad too carelessly for Beth's liking. She did not scold him for it like she once might have. He had just gotten her out of quite an uncomfortable situation, after all. She could repay him by keeping her opinions on the care of books to herself.

"You still seem a bit shaken, Beth," he said in a surprisingly tender voice.

Beth glanced over at him from the corner of her eye. Her usually cheerful and occasionally too passionate cousin watched her with concern.

"It's nothing." Beth smiled.

Hugh cocked his head to the side. "It is not nothing. You know you can talk to me about anything. I hardly see any use in keeping things hidden away until they eat you down to crumbs."

Beth worried at the inside of her bottom lip, half turning away from her cousin. "You will think me foolish."

"Probably," Hugh chuckled. "But our differences in temperament and opinions often seem foolish to the other. Still, I will try my best to understand."

Now that the immediate threat of Mr. Mills had been eradicated, Beth's mind returned to the garden and the thoughts that had inspired what no doubt seemed like strange actions to Weston. They weighed heavily on her as if they had replaced her bones with bricks.

"I have a confession to make…"

She laid out the whole story for Hugh, who listened with surprising restraint. Normally he would have interjected with questions or comments. Like her Uncle Dalton, patience was not Hugh's strong suit. When she finished, he stared straight ahead for some time.

"Say something, cousin. Your silence is terrifying and very unlike you," Beth finally nudged after an anxious moment.

"It is a lot to take in."

“You said you would understand, remember?” Beth suddenly wished she still had the book in her hands so she could keep her fingers from twisting around themselves.

“Yes, I did. And I plan to. I just…did not expect this from you of all people.” He blew out a long, slow breath—surprised though not upset it seemed.

“I did not expect it from me either,” Beth admitted quietly.

Hugh shifted in his seat so he could look Beth in the eyes. “But you are happy? You love him?”

“I do…” That small confession sent a ripple of pain intertwined with happiness through her. She had not said that aloud to anyone yet.

“And yet?”

Beth sighed. This was always where she tripped up. “I do not know, Hugh. Truly. Something is holding me back, but I cannot decipher it.”

“Has Weston done something—”

“No, of course not,” Beth said firmly. “He has been perfect. And yet…”

Hugh looked down at the new rug Beth had chosen for the room. “Well, as you know, I am no expert at love. In fact, I always thought if anyone should bear that title, it would be you.”

Beth gave a wry smile. “I am sorry to disappoint you.”

“Not at all,” Hugh added quickly. “Is it odd that I find it comforting? Even our romantic Beth can have struggles in love. But I do believe that you will find your way through it—with Weston, of course. I have seen the way you two are around each other. You love each other, that much is clear. I think you will find a way to accept it fully, whatever your hesitations, and come out stronger for it in the end.”

A small smile worked its way onto Beth’s lips. “Thank you, Hugh. I appreciate your confidence in me.”

Beth only wished that she could feel that confidence for herself.

~

IN THE END, Weston did not wait too long before returning to Hannover Grange himself. The garden simply did not possess the same

vibrancy once Beth had left. His eyes roamed over the grass, then the steps of the veranda, then the wood floor of the back foyer and hallway. Nothing seemed worth looking at properly while his mind replayed Beth's reaction in the garden. While he did not think he had seen disgust or hatred in her expression, he had certainly seen something he did not like. Confusion? Frustration? But why? And why wouldn't she tell him?

Weston only saw the other pair of legs crossing the front foyer from the main staircase from his downcast gaze when it was already too late. With a muffled grunt, he walked right into the unknown gentleman.

"Watch where you're going, Quincy."

That voice immediately set Weston's already frayed nerves on edge. His eyes dragged up the man's body from his polished boots all the way up to his smug expression. "Mills. What brings you here?"

Mr. Mills wrinkled his nose and glanced about the room. "I was just having a chat with your lovely wife."

Weston's heart froze. With a painful swallow, he forced out what he hoped was a casually disinterested reply. "Is that so? I trust you had a pleasant visit?"

Again, Mr. Mills' normally arrogant attitude struggled to maintain its hold as he once again failed to look at Weston. He seemed vexed about something. "Fear not, Quincy. I know a dead end when I see one. Mrs. Quincy made it clear she wanted nothing to do with me. She rushed off to 'freshen up' and then dispatched her ill-mannered cousin to send me away. Congratulations on snagging such a beauty. I have not a clue how you managed it."

With one final disgruntled sneer, Mr. Mills marched toward the front door. Weston watched as he trotted down the steps, hopped onto his horse, and galloped down the drive. A touch of guilty satisfaction eased Weston's own frustrations. He knew that if Beth had any inclination of Mr. Mills' real motives—which she clearly did now—she would not allow his misplaced hopes to progress. Still, seeing such a normally cunning man fail to ensnare a lady he had set his sights on reminded Weston that even Mr. Mills did not always get what he wanted.

"I should thank Hugh for his help in driving that addlepate away. It seems he used some choice words that I want to hear for myself,"

Weston chuckled as he started up the stairs toward the guest wing.

He knocked on Hugh's bedroom door and waited for an answer. When none came after a moment, Weston wandered further down the hall. Perhaps the young man was enjoying some time in one of the common areas. Weston's theory was proved correct when he heard Hugh's muffled voice coming from the sitting room, door slightly ajar. The other voice stopped Weston in his tracks.

"Has Weston done something—"

"No, of course not," Beth said firmly. "He has been perfect. And yet…"

His wife's words trailed off into silence as Weston scrambled back down the way he had come. He walked as quickly and quietly as possible toward the landing that offered the hallway leading to his own quarters. As soon as he rounded the corner, he pressed his back against the wall. His heart pulsed in his throat as Beth's words circled around his mind.

He has been perfect. And yet…

Weston rubbed a hand along his jaw, massaging the tense muscles. He knew he hadn't been meant to hear those words. But he had. What could he do with that information?

With a heavy sigh, Weston pushed himself off the wall and slowly made his way toward his bedroom. His eyes remained on the floor once more, defeat setting in. In truth, he did not know what he could possibly do with that information.

If he was doing everything right, and Beth still could not come to fully love him for some reason...what else was there to do?

Chapter 18

Beth's fingers clumsily fiddled with the keys of the pianoforte. She had holed herself up in the music room on the pretense that she had not been practicing much and feared that her skills had become rusty. She had never been amazing with the instrument to begin with though she considered herself to be proficient. Still, her mind could not focus enough to force her fingers to cooperate.

Hugh had not bought her excuse, though he understood that Beth needed a certain amount of time to herself, especially when dealing with a complex situation—or rather, trying to distract herself from it. Thankfully, Hugh had accepted his task to keep Weston company during his last week at Hannover Grange before leaving Beth to face her husband alone. Despite all her alone time, Beth still had no idea what she would or should say to Weston when she could no longer hide away.

She jumped when she heard the door open behind her, hand accidentally slamming down onto the keys and unleashing a discordant noise that seemed to mimic her current emotional state. When she swiveled around on the bench, she saw Weston standing in the doorway.

Something squeezed her chest at the sight of his cautiously hopeful expression. She had seen that look several times over the past several days since their uncomfortable conversation in the garden when they did spend limited time together. Beth had done her best to avoid him as much as possible, and when she couldn't, she kept conversations light and mundane. She had not expected him to seek her out.

"A maid told me I would find you here," he started with a strained half-smile. When Beth did not respond, he cleared his throat and

continued. “I was hoping that you would like to join me for a ride around the county. There’s a fascinating ancient church about an hour away that I thought you might like to see since I noticed you reading a book the other day about England’s oldest churches.”

The thoughtful suggestion made Beth want to crawl under a rock. Her husband was always so considerate of her, even when she did not deserve it.

“Where is Hugh? Perhaps he can accompany you,” she offered nonchalantly.

Weston’s eyes darted to the door. “He is currently occupied with his own entertainments.”

Beth’s mouth twitched, threatening to frown. Perhaps Hugh had grown weary of the mission his cousin had given him. She supposed she couldn’t blame him. He was the guest here, after all, and deserved to enjoy himself instead of acting as an awkward intermediary between a strained couple.

“No thank you, Weston. I am sure the day will be too hot, and I am content to spend my afternoon with this much neglected pianoforte.”

Weston’s gaze dropped to the ground, disappointed. He no doubt heard the lie in Beth’s words. Autumn was almost upon them. Though Beth had not ventured outside yet, she knew it was entirely likely that the weather would actually be perfectly pleasant for a long ride. She would have to think of some other excuse to decline future suggestions for outdoor activities.

Just as she turned to resume her lackluster practice, Weston’s voice froze her. “I miss you,” he said, so quietly that it almost did not reach her. But it did more than that. The pain and loneliness in it struck her deep in her soul. “We have not spent much time together recently. I am afraid it feels rather unfamiliar to me.”

Beth could only watch as Weston came further into the room. To her relief, he stopped several feet away. Being physically close to him now would only torture Beth with guilt.

“Please, Beth, tell me what’s wrong.”

A firm, cold wall shot up around Beth’s heart. How could she talk to Weston about something she barely understood herself? Sometimes she wished that he would just let things go.

“You worry about me too much.” She turned her back to him and put her hands over the keys, forcing herself to play a few more

measures of the piece in front of her. She inwardly cringed at the numerous mistakes she made just in that short span.

The sound of Weston's boots marching across the wood floor finally made Beth realize the gravity of the situation. She would not get out of this so easily. She nervously looked up when Weston stopped right beside the pianoforte. He stared at her with an intensity she had never seen before on his gentle face.

"I am begging you, Beth. Please talk to me," Weston prodded again, more firmly this time, almost a command. His brows drew close together, the corners of his mouth fighting a frown. He was frustrated and very near his breaking point.

Beth, however, was reaching a breaking point as well. She did not appreciate being backed into a corner after trying to politely avoid the issue until she felt ready. Frustration with Weston—unjustified though it was—and frustration with herself churned deep inside Beth as she and her husband locked eyes.

It crescendoed as she glared back at Weston. He refused to back down. Finally, her resentment burst forth. She stood from the bench, its feet scraping against the wood floor. "For goodness' sake, just leave it alone," she snapped.

"I will not leave it alone," Weston retorted, his voice rising in volume. This only vaguely surprised Beth beneath her simmering anger. She would have never guessed Weston to be capable of yelling —and a part of her hated that she had been the one to drive him to it. "I cannot help you if I do not know what's going on."

"I do not need your help, Weston! You are the one who needs me, and I only helped you because I pitied you!"

A crushing silence fell in the room, ice spreading through the air, as soon as those horrible words left Beth's lips. They continued to stare at each other, their angry energy completely dissipated. Weston's face had drained of color and Beth's mouth hung open, utterly shocked that she would say such a thing.

Without another word, Weston turned on his heel and flew from the room. Beth remained rooted to her spot, every limb turned to stone. She could only watch him go, powerless to stop him. Her stomach flipped and caved in on itself. She wondered if she might actually be sick. She had taken her frustrations with herself out on Weston and said something dark and cruel, in an attempt to defend

herself from being forced to acknowledge the battle that had been raging inside her over these past few days.

Hot tears slipped down Beth's cheeks and she covered her face with trembling hands. She had never felt such a deep, burning shame. She wished that it would consume her, turn her into a useless pile of ash. That was already a better fate than she felt she currently deserved.

Silent sobs shook her body, her throat strangling any sounds that tried to emerge. It took longer for her mind to fully comprehend what she had done. When it did, the truth nearly brought her to her knees.

Beth had likely broken Weston's heart and completely ruined their chance at a happy future with words she did not truly mean.

~

WESTON BARRELED THROUGH THE HOUSE, ignoring startled looks from the maids and footmen he passed by. Beth's words had left a deep chill in his bones. He did not think he could outrun it, but he would try. He should never have listened to Hugh when he encouraged Weston to attempt a reconciliation, an open conversation that could get them on the road toward mending whatever kept them apart.

Beth's words rang through his ears as he stormed toward the front doors. Even worse than that, the pain in her face as she had shouted those words at him had already imprinted itself on his mind. It killed all the hope in Weston to know that he had caused that pain.

Had Hannover Grange always been this large? It felt like it took him forever to march down several hallways and almost as many staircases. He could not stand being in this place a moment longer, this place that they had made a home together. It carried so many of Beth's thoughtful touches. Every painting he passed that she had chosen, every room he glimpsed that she had artfully rearranged only reminded Weston that Beth did not truly belong here. She should have done these things in a home where she actually wanted to live with a man she truly loved—not someone who had selfishly chosen to keep her prisoner.

When Weston finally made it to the front foyer, he waved Mr. Curtis away and burst through the front doors. Two horses patiently

waited, idly nibbling at the grass along the curved edge of the drive where it looped in a circle before the front steps. One was Weston's bay gelding and the other was Beth's beautiful palomino mare. His teeth clenched together at the sight of them standing side by side. He had been far too optimistic to have them both summoned.

"Send Mrs. Quincy's horse back to the stables and have someone else take her for a ride," he commanded the nearby groom as he mounted his horse, Admiral, and snapped him into a canter.

As soon as they rounded the corner toward the back of the estate, Weston pushed Admiral into a gallop, leaving both his home and Beth behind. Contrary to Beth's earlier excuse, the day was not hot at all. It would have been perfect for a leisurely ride through the county. It would have been perfect for talking and laughing and simply being together just like before—before this confusing, mysterious mess started.

The cool wind whipped against his face and hair. His heart crumpled as if being crushed under Admiral's powerful hooves. "Blast at all!" he cried, his pain swallowed by the wind.

He cursed himself for stealing Beth's happiness. Though he had been desperate at the time, he should have never allowed her to entertain this idea of saving him from a miserable marriage.

After all, it seemed that they had ended up in one after all if this was how Beth really felt.

Weston wished that he could ride away from his pain and regret and guilt. Perhaps Admiral could gallop away into the distance and they could forge a new life for themselves. He doubted Beth would miss him. His hands clutched the reins, knuckles turning white. He had been a complete fool for ever thinking that Beth had come to love him.

Chapter 19

Weston had successfully managed to avoid Beth for the rest of the previous day—just like the coward he had always been. It had not been as difficult as he'd feared. She did not seem particularly interested in running into him either. After having a night of rest and reflection, would she want to see him today? And did he even really want to see her?

A small part of him did, he realized, as he tentatively opened the breakfast room door. He still sighed with relief when he saw her empty chair.

"Weston, I am sorry—"

"Let us not speak of it now, Hugh," Weston sighed as he forced himself into the room. "I know you did not have any ill intent. I do not think either of us expected that to happen yesterday…"

The younger man nodded, expression morose as he swirled the black coffee in his cup. Weston walked the length of the room to his seat at the head of the table, every muscle tensed to turn around at the faintest sound of her presence. She still had not arrived by the time he had settled into his second helpings. The two men ate in uncomfortable silence until Hugh excused himself with his plate still half full of food, leaving Weston well and truly alone.

His head drooped between his shoulders as he ate. He was already exhausted though his day had only just begun. Of course, he had barely slept last night. What little sleep he did manage to snatch had been broken by vague nightmares of Beth's words twisted into sneers and jeering laughter.

Weston squeezed his eyes closed and forced himself to take a long swig of coffee as a memory of one of the more vivid nightmares forced

itself to the front of his mind. In that dream, Beth had told Weston that she had never signed the register on their wedding day. With a cold smirk, she informed him that they were never actually married and that this had all been an elaborate prank to see just how long he could go on deluding himself.

He angrily stabbed at a sausage and shook his head, trying to banish those horrible thoughts. Even through his pain, Weston knew that Beth would never do something like that. She had said something cruel yesterday, but it was the truth—the truth that she had clearly been suppressing and could no longer contain in her kind, long-suffering heart.

Beth never came to the breakfast room. Weston was not surprised. He scarfed down the rest of his meal, suddenly eager to quit the room. This was the first time he had eaten breakfast without her. But he would have to get used to this. From now on, he would not force her to suffer his presence any more than she needed to.

With his hastily eaten breakfast sitting poorly in his stomach, Weston made his way across the house to his study, praying the whole way that he would not run into Beth. He still was not sure how he would feel or react if he happened upon her. She had no reason to come to his study unless to specifically seek him out, so Weston felt confident that he could hide there for a while.

Weston breathed easier when he arrived without a single sighting of his wife. He buried himself behind his desk and pulled some unanswered letters and estate ledgers toward him. At least he could get some work done and hopefully keep his mind preoccupied in the meantime. He picked up a stack of old letters he had already responded to and set them on the corner of his admittedly messy desk. The slightly crumpled corner of one sheet stuck out between the rest, catching his attention.

The apprehensive feeling in Weston's chest told him that he already knew what it was. Still, he pulled it out of the stack. His eyes skimmed it quickly, his heart cracking a little deeper with every word he read. It was a letter he had written for Beth just after they had arrived at Hannover Grange.

"In my heart of hearts, I pray that we can truly fall in love. That is my greatest hope, a hope that I will cling to for the rest of our days together. I know, my dearest Beth, that I have no right to hope. But I fear that I do

not know how to stop. So, I will quietly love you—as a friend, certainly, and as a man should love his wife. I will be ready to fall in love with you the moment you wish it. I am already halfway there. I have been since the start."

That foolish optimism sliced Weston's heart even deeper. Yes, somehow, he had once thought that there was a tiny possibility that they could truly love each other…that Beth could love him in return. He barely managed to hold back the bitter tears that longed to spill as he crushed the letter in his first and threw it away into some dark corner of the room. He only wished that he could discard his love for Beth so easily.

Chapter 20



Beth's slippers whispered against the rug as she paced around her room, fingers twisting anxiously around each other. Guilt still consumed her every waking moment—and even her unconscious ones. She did not know how she would ever forgive herself for saying something so foolish in a fit of anger yesterday.

Like an immature child, she had spent the rest of yesterday and the morning in her room avoiding Weston—and Hugh. Her cousin would no doubt have some choice words for her. She had not even gone down to share breakfast with Weston as she had done since her first week as his wife. Part of her was terrified to face him and see the pain she had caused. The other part had been busy scrambling to think of some way she could possibly fix this.

The pacing did not help her mind produce any useful ideas, but it was better than hiding under her covers and crying the day away. That would certainly do nothing to help. Still, it was tempting to retreat into her soft bed, especially when she was this exhausted. Every step felt heavy, as if weighted by brick, and her modestly tightened stays felt like a vice grip around her ribs. She hardly slept last night, seeing over and over again the shock and hurt on Weston's face before he had stormed out of the music room.

Eventually Beth paused at her writing desk, leaning against it for support. She glanced over the stack of letters she had collected from her family over the last few months and thought of her parents. She desperately wished she could write to Mama now and receive an instant reply or snap her fingers and have Papa here before her so she could snuggle into his strong arms.

A soft knock on Beth's door from the hallway stopped her heart.

Was Weston on the other side? She hadn't expected him to want anything to do with her. She pushed away from her writing desk and tentatively stepped toward the door. If Weston did want to see her, surely he would approach from the sitting room rather than the hallway.

"Beth, it's your cousin. May I come in?" Hugh called before Beth could pose the question.

Her relief was minimal. Hugh did not sound angry or upset, but she certainly could not bear any scolding he might wish to offer. Anything Hugh had to say on the subject, Beth had said worse to herself. After considering sending him away, Beth crossed to the door and opened it. Perhaps he had a message from Weston.

"I have a message for you," Hugh started immediately, his normally lighthearted gaze serious and disheartened.

How serendipitous, Beth thought. She motioned for Hugh to come in but he remained in the doorway. "Is it from Weston?"

"No. It is from Aunt Anna." He held out a neatly folded letter, Mama's elegant handwriting immediately evident on the outside. Beth's eyes narrowed as she took it.

"And how did you come by it?"

Hugh pursed his lips and looked down at his feet. "Firstly, I am sorry for pushing in yesterday where I did not belong. I encouraged Weston to seek you out."

Beth's hand shot out and she grasped her cousin's upper arm. "You were only trying to help, and I greatly appreciate that. The fault is entirely mine, I know. I just have not quite figured out what to say to my husband."

The young man still did not meet Beth's eyes. "You see, this is not my first time meddling in your affairs. After our conversation on that day when Mr. Mills paid you an unexpected visit, I wrote to your mother. I asked her to send you some words of advice. This arrived with the morning post but you were not in the breakfast room."

Hugh finally looked up when Beth gave his arm a squeeze. She smiled at her cousin with all the warmth her fractured heart possessed. With her other hand, she pressed the letter to her chest. "Thank you, Hugh. You are so very thoughtful."

"Only sometimes. Do not get too comfortable with it," he chuckled. "Read it. I hope it helps—and I will be staying out of your business

unless expressly invited to become involved. On that note, I will be in my room packing and preparing for my journey back to Eton should you need me for anything."

Before Beth could offer her sincere thanks again, Hugh had already disappeared down the hall, his boots clacking sharply on the wood floor. She sighed, closed the door, and let her back rest against it as she lifted her mother's letter up to her face. Somehow it felt heavy though it was only one sheet. Her index finger traced over the plain wax seal. Well, just a few minutes ago she had been wishing for instant communication with Mama. This was as close as she could get. Serendipitous, indeed. Finally, Beth took up the letter opener from her desk and broke the seal.

"*Darling Beth, I am writing to you after receiving Hugh's letter and giving his words some deep thought. I am so very sorry to hear of your struggles to find happiness in your marriage. Papa and I both wish that we could be there beside you to help you navigate this. For now, we hope this will suffice and reach you in a timely manner. Papa is here beside me as I write. He earnestly implored me to note that he loves you very much.*"

Beth paused to chuckle at this. Her parents often answered their correspondence side by side in Papa's study. She could perfectly picture them working on this much-needed letter, both trying to express their thoughts.

"*Your mother wishes you to know that it is not too late to fight for love. Your father reminds you that admitting when you are wrong is crucial for growth. Ultimately, we both want you to be happy. This difficult period will pass and we believe that love is waiting for you on the other side. But only you can decide if you will reach for it.*"

Beth reread the letter twice more. Her parents' words etched themselves into her heart. While she greatly appreciated her mother's kind wisdom, something Papa had said struck something deep in her after her hours of agonizing over yesterday's disaster. She was an adult now. She had made this mess, and it was her responsibility to fix it. No matter what anyone else said or did, Beth would have to face this herself. No matter how Weston had felt about her prior to yesterday, Beth had hurt him deeply. Before she could consider anything else, she needed to humble herself before Weston, even if she had not yet crafted the perfect apology.

Somehow, that truth gave her the final push she needed. Her eyes

wandered over Mama's familiar, comforting handwriting, gathering a little more strength before setting it atop her desk. With a deep breath, she emerged from her room into the hallway. Since the breakfast hour had already come and gone, Beth had not the faintest clue where she might find her husband, nor had Hugh given her a chance to ask. She picked one direction and started down the hall. Luckily, it was not long before she ran into a footman going about his duties.

"Excuse me, Zachary, do you happen to know where Mr. Quincy is?"

"I believe so, ma'am. I last saw him in his study perhaps ten minutes ago or so."

Beth picked up her skirts to keep from tripping on the hem and hurried away. "Thank you!" she called over her shoulder.

She made it to Weston's study in record time, ungracefully half running through the house. She paused outside the door just long enough to fix her skirts and slow her breathing to a normal pace. With fingers curled into a tight ball, she knocked on the door. There was no answer. Though she did not like to intrude on Weston's private space without an invitation, Beth took the risk and slowly opened the door, fully prepared to beg for permission to enter on the chance that Weston had not heard her knock.

A quick glance around the cozy room revealed that it was empty. She must have just missed him. Beth deflated, her courage waning slightly. Perhaps it was just as well. She still had no idea precisely what she would say when she saw him aside from a profuse apology.

Just as she turned to leave, a crumpled piece of paper in the corner caught her eye. He really must have left just moments ago since none of the staff had been in yet to tidy up after him. Beth saw no reason why she shouldn't since she was already here. She quickly crossed the room and scooped the balled up sheet into her hand. Weston's less than elegant handwriting peeked up at her from between the creases.

Beth's heart launched into her throat. She wanted to unfurl it and see what this discarded letter contained. She was just about to set it aside, thinking it better to respect Weston's privacy, when the date at the corner leaped out at her as if it wanted to be seen. Weston had written this letter the day they had arrived at Hannover Grange.

Uncertain and intrigued all at once, Beth slowly smoothed out the

sad sheet of paper. Her eyes filled with tears as soon as she read the greeting.

"*My dearest Beth… My truest and deepest love…*"

Beth read every word and line multiple times, sometimes out of order as her blurred vision struggled to stay focused. Her other hand had come up to cover her trembling mouth. Her heart thundered like never before, threatening to burst from her chest and race after Weston on its own.

This letter had immobilized Beth. The sincerity in it had changed everything in her.

Her beloved Weston had held a minuscule hope all along that they could truly come to love each other one day. He had had affections for her since their first meeting, but he had thought her too good for a plain and uninteresting man like himself. Even after Beth had proposed twice in order to rescue him, he had never allowed himself to let that hope truly blossom, instead pouring out his love into this letter that he never intended to share.

"So, I will quietly love you—as a friend, certainly, and as a man should love his wife. I will be ready to fall in love with you the moment you wish it. I am already halfway there. I have been since the start."

Those last few lines settled deep into Beth's soul. Once she finished reading it for what must have been the fifth time, Beth pressed that precious letter to her heart.

They really had fallen in love. It had taken her longer to get there, but Beth had only recently started to suspect that she had been in love with Weston for longer than she realized.

"How could I have been so stupid?" Beth groaned, still clutching the letter to her chest. She had been so caught up in her old ideals of how she would fall in love and get married. She had been caught up in what could have been if she had chosen a different path.

Beth knew without a doubt now that Weston loved her and was completely devoted to her. She had seen it time and again in everything he had said and done. She had just not allowed herself to see the truth in it because she had not been ready to see the truth herself.

She looked down at the letter once more and reread the final words.

"Yours forever and always, Weston."

He was hers, forever and always, if only she would get out of their way and allow their hearts to finally meet on this path that they had chosen together. Though she had had her doubts at first, Beth knew it in her bones now.

This was the right path, the best path, because Weston walked it beside her.

With letter in hand, Beth flew from the room, a plan forming. She must prove to Weston that she was his, forever and always.



As she raced back to her room, hiking her skirts up far higher than was appropriate even for a lady in a rush, Beth stopped every servant she could find and asked if they had seen Weston. Finally, a startled Ellen, who had settled into her role as a new maid very well, informed Beth that she thought she saw him heading to his bedchambers.

That almost stopped Beth in her tracks. If Ellen was right, and if Weston hadn't taken any detours, that meant that he would be just one room away from her. She slowed when she reached their hallway, hoping that Weston would not emerge just yet. She needed just a bit more time. Luckily, there was no sign of him. As quietly as possible, she slipped into her room from the door in the hall and nearly clattered into her desk with her momentum.

She seized the stack of letters from her family that she had saved and flipped through them so rapidly that she hardly had time to process the handwriting. With a triumphant yell, she snatched a letter from the pile. Mama had written it to her after her family had returned home from their visit at Hannover Grange. Forcing herself to slow down, Beth quickly reread it to ensure that it was in fact the letter she was looking for.

"*My sweet daughter, I cannot tell you how happy I am for you and your husband. I know it might not be my place to say, but as your mother, I believe I know you well enough to make this statement: you and Weston have grown to love each other.*

"*I know that you are still unsure about this because the circumstances of your marriage are not how you imagined your life unfolding. But please, Beth, keep your heart open. There is nothing wrong with letting go of old*

dreams in favor of new ones that will make you even happier than you had thought possible. This can be the perfect happy ending you have always wanted—if you allow it to be so."

A lump formed in Beth's throat as she reread the letter in earnest, forgetting her earlier rush. She needed to absorb these words, to truly let them sink into the depths of her soul—especially those particular lines. When she had first received this letter, she had quickly dismissed it. Even then, she had not been completely ready yet to admit her feelings.

A dry chuckle managed to slip past Beth's lips. Of course Mama was right. She had known it right away. How had Beth been the last one to see it? Her free hand clutched the top of her chair as she mentally kicked herself. She had let her past naïve notions of love cloud the truth that had been right in front of her this entire time.

When her eyes fell on the new letter, she lifted her head and felt an unexpected confidence slowly seeping through her. She knew the truth now, and she needed to act on it before it was too late. With both letters in hand, Beth opened the door that led to their shared sitting room. As she crossed over to Weston's door, her heart roared so rapidly that it felt more like one long, powerful beat than a million little hammers.

The confidence that had inspired her to make her way here flickered as she stood outside Weston's door, desperately trying to force some air into her lungs. Just because she had completely accepted her love for Weston did not mean that he would forgive her. Perhaps she had destroyed his love just as she had discovered her own. Her knuckles hovered over the wood. She had said some horrible things. Weston would be well within his rights to hold her at arm's length for the rest of their lives.

Beth rubbed a finger over the smooth paper of the letters in her other hand. She remembered Weston's words, and her parents'. She would not know unless she tried—and either way, Weston deserved an apology. With one last deep breath, Beth knocked.

A painfully long moment passed. Though it might have been no more than a second, it felt like an eternity to Beth's burning nerves. She had even begun to wonder if perhaps he was not in his room after all when she finally heard movement behind the closed door. It opened just a crack, revealing only half of Weston's face.

Even that small glimpse was enough to send Beth's heart soaring. She knew without a doubt that it belonged entirely to him and him alone. Despite his stoic expression, he looked as handsome as ever. More importantly, he looked like home…like her best friend, like the one person who was everything she needed and wanted and more. She could see it all so clearly now.

Neither of them spoke at first, allowing Beth some time to offer one last prayer that he might find it in his kind heart to give her another chance.

"Would you join me in the sitting room?" she finally asked, her voice surprisingly steady. Weston grimaced and turned his face away from her, poised to decline. "I found a discarded letter in your study when I was looking for you earlier," she added quickly, desperately. "There are some things I would like to discuss with you."

Weston's expression went from resentful to embarrassed in half a second. "You were never meant to see that," he grumbled. Still, he stepped out into the sitting room. Beth shuffled back to give him space even though she wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around him.

After taking a few steps, he turned and looked at her with an unreadable gaze. Beth's heart ached. She only wanted to see him smile and laugh. She wanted to see the way he looked at her with the love in his eyes that she had been too blind to see. Beth held both letters in her hands, keeping Weston's close to her heart while holding Mama's out to him.

He eyed it suspiciously. "What is this?"

"Mama wrote it after their visit. Please read it."

After another moment of careful consideration, Weston took the letter, careful not to accidentally brush his fingers against Beth's. She pressed her hands together at her waist, worried that if she let her nails dig into her dress, she would tear the fabric apart. His expression passed from fond reminiscing to heartache as he read silently.

Finally, Weston handed it back to Beth with a pained smile. "That is a kind, lovely letter, but Mrs. Waynford is clearly wrong."

Beth slowly shook her head and let both letters flutter to the floor. She crossed the distance between them in a few steps and took Weston's hands, threading their fingers together. Surprise and tentative hope flashed through those brown eyes that Beth had always

found so charming.

She looked down at their joined hands. They fit together so perfectly. It was all so obvious.

“First, I must apologize for what I said yesterday,” she whispered, afraid that if she spoke any louder her emotions would overcome her and render her unable to say these vital things. “Though it does not excuse my behavior, I said it in a moment of defensive anger. I was so confused about my own heart and I must have already known deep down that I was being foolish and unnecessarily hurtful to you these past few days. When you confronted me, I lashed out.”

Weston nodded, his eyes dark with the memory. Beth inhaled through her nose and exhaled from her mouth, gently rubbing Weston’s knuckles with her thumbs both for his comfort and her own.

“I know now with absolute certainty, after experiencing the pain that came with thinking that I could lose you—that I had lost you—even though we are already bound together forever… After reading the truth of your love for me in your letter, and after reading the truth of my own love through Mama’s eyes…

“I was trapped in my old ideals, my old dreams of how my life should have been. I had such a clear picture of how and when I would fall in love and marry ever since I was a little girl. Such things, apparently, are not always easy to dismiss. I panicked when I finally came to the realization that I could change what my heart had been set on for so long. I could fall in love with a new path… I could fall in love with you.

“Weston, I did fall in love with you. I love you.”

As those precious words finally filled the air between them, their truth echoed in Beth’s bones. She smiled despite the bittersweet twist in her chest. Of course she would have preferred to say this under very different circumstances, but late was better than never. Weston continued to watch her in silence, processing what she had said. Beth did not mind the wait. After all, Weston had waited for her for over two years.

“I had to escape those things first in order to confront myself and admit my feelings for my husband. That sounds odd, doesn’t it?” she chuckled, the sound barely more than a huff.

Beth took another deep breath and looked into Weston’s eyes, praying that he would see her sincerity. In return, she saw his

understanding and forgiveness already. She still needed to finish what she had come here to say.

"I love you with all my heart, mind, and soul. I am so blessed to be your wife. I know I said some irreversibly cruel things yesterday, and I understand if you can never think of me in the same way again, but I selfishly pray that you can forgive me."

Those last words hung in the air for a tense moment. Beth's confidence started to crumble. Had she misread him? Did he want to forgive her but was still too hurt to trust her again? Everything seemed possible, from her wildest dreams of true love with Weston to the grim alternative of a future filled with unhealed heartbreak.

Weston smiled softly. The expression enveloped Beth in a deep warmth, like welcome sunshine breaking through days of driving rain. He took Beth's face in his hands and tilted his head down, touching their foreheads together.

"Nothing is irreversible, my love. We can start anew from here as true husband and wife," he said in a low voice, so low that Beth knew she would be the only one able to hear it even if someone stood right beside them. This was meant for her and her alone, meant to go directly to her heart. "I love you, too, Beth. With everything I am. Forever and always. I am so glad that what I thought were idle dreams in my letter have come true after all."

Beth reached up and placed her hands over Weston's, her eyes searching his face for even the slightest hint of doubt. "Are you sure? I feel so horrible about what happened yesterday. Do you really forgive me? Can it be so easy?"

In response, Weston's smile only widened before he kissed Beth's forehead. She could feel him breathing deep and certain. "I forgive you, Beth. I understand. All this time I never wanted to rush you or push you in a certain direction. If you were to come to love me, I wanted it to happen naturally and truthfully, not as though I were tricking you or because you felt that you should love me simply because we are married. I am only glad now that you did fall in love with me on your own terms—though I do hope my charms helped some."

They both laughed quietly, his bright and hers airy, intertwined together in perfect harmony. "No, Weston, I did not fall in love with you solely on my own. Some things are inevitable. In the end, I

followed my heart where it had been trying to lead me this whole time. It knew better than I did that you are my perfect match. You showed me that in every word and action. And yes, your charms did help immensely."

Weston nodded, his expression growing serious once more. He kissed Beth on the forehead again. "You are my miracle, Beth." He kissed her on the cheek. "You are my heart." He kissed her on the lips, bold and passionate and so deeply loving. "You are my forever," he said when he finally pulled away.

This time Beth took Weston's face in her hands, a grin lighting up her face, heart leaping for joy. She threw her arms around his neck, laughter bursting forth when he picked her up and twirled her around. Beth's mind still spun even after Weston put her feet back on solid ground. She simply could not believe that she had the privilege of loving this amazing man for the rest of her life. The thought made her dizzy with a happiness that completely eclipsed everything she had previously thought possible. Yet Weston had made it her new, wonderful reality.

~

WESTON HELD Beth tightly in his arms as if he still could not quite believe that this wasn't a dream. She buried her face in his neck, the gentle heat from her skin on his somehow made all of this feel so much more real. Even when they had come close to revealing their feelings for each other, even when they had kissed for the first time, Weston had never truly held Beth like this. And he could hardly believe that he had just given her the kiss he had been waiting for his whole life.

It was even better than their first kiss, though that one would always hold a special place in Weston's memory. As his arms slipped deeper around Beth, Weston realized that every kiss would be better than the last because it was a continued declaration of their love for each other. He nestled his cheek against her hair and smiled.

Beth loved him. She really, truly loved him. He had no doubt of that and he would never doubt it again. He had seen the deep and desperate sincerity in her eyes. He had seen everything there—not just love, but true friendship and the promise of a lifetime of laughter

ahead of them.

“Perhaps we should have a seat to recover from all this excitement,” he whispered against her hair after a long, blissful moment.

Beth nodded against his chest. One of his hands trailed down her back and around her waist, keeping her by his side as they walked the short distance to the small sofa in the middle of the room, meant just for two. Weston sat first and opened his arms. With a contented smile, Beth slid right in. He had known for so long that Beth was perfect for him. Yet somehow, she had only become more perfect. She filled the space in his arms and his heart as if there had never been anything missing in the first place. She brought herself into his side and let her head rest on his shoulder.

Weston gave a deep sigh, feeling the way Beth’s body moved in time with his breathing. He felt so comfortable, so at home, so in love. He angled his head so he could peer down at his wife. She still wore that same utterly pleased smile. He knew she had meant every word she said. She had meant the passion and love in them.

“I know we went about things in a rather backwards fashion, but I am so glad that our hearts have finally met in the same place at the same time,” he said quietly.

A hint of shame flashed across Beth’s face. She frowned, her bottom lip protruding just slightly. Weston had to stop himself from chuckling at that sweet and charming expression. “I am sorry it took me so long to get here.”

Weston gently shushed her and pulled her even closer with one arm while his other hand grazed along her chin, tilting it up so she would look at him. “Think nothing of it anymore. We are here now, and from here we can go anywhere and do anything we want.”

The smile that overcame Beth’s frown illuminated her from the inside out. How was it possible that she could be even more beautiful and more perfect then the first time he had laid eyes on her? He remembered that moment very well, just before their official introduction. He had thought then that there was no way such a breathtaking creature would ever spare a second thought for him. Now, surpassing all his wildest and most longed for dreams, that dazzling woman was his wife.

Weston lifted her chin up just a bit more while he leaned down,

their lips meeting in perfect unison. As they kissed again, just one of many that they would share in their lifetime, Weston knew that every day with Beth would only get better and better.

As long as he had Beth—as long as they had each other—everything else would work out as it should. They were living proof of that.

Chapter 22



Arm in arm and dressed in their finest attire, Beth and Weston walked up the stairs to Lord and Lady Shawberry's ballroom. Beth beamed the entire way, not a hint of nerves in sight. Having the certainty of Weston's love was all that mattered. Besides, she had not quite come down from her cloud of bliss since that wonderful day a week ago when she had finally come to her senses and truly opened her heart to Weston.

When they made it to the landing, Beth leaned over and whispered, "You know, this will be our first time attending a ball together since I proposed to you."

Weston paused, tilting his head to the side with a handsomely thoughtful expression. Beth's heart fluttered. It was almost unbearable how good-looking and endearing her husband was. "As a matter of fact, I do believe this will be our first time dancing together since well before our marriage. We did dance together a few times last Season, but we were never partners at that last ball." He smiled down at her, so happy and so in love. "Everything is so different now—and so wonderful. I cannot wait to dance with you."

"And I cannot wait to dance with you. I will be the luckiest woman in the room."

They had arrived at the grand double doors of the ballroom and as soon as they swung open, a merry scene of liveliness greeted them. Beth could not stop herself from grinning as they stepped into the generously sized room, even if she knew such an expression was not terribly ladylike. These days, she found it more and more difficult to hide her true joy behind muted expressions. And why should she when she had been blessed beyond measure? She wanted the entire

world to know just how happy her dear husband made her.

Weston turned to Beth with an equally large and excited smile. He took Beth's hand and pulled her along towards the concentration of couples, just in time for one set to end. He paused at the edge of the dance floor and bowed low over her hand, his wonderful lips brushing against the smooth silk of her glove. "May I have—"

"Of course!" Beth cried, suddenly impatient to finally enjoy such a moment with the love of her life. It was her turn to grab his hand and lead him out onto the floor so they could take their places in line with the new couples. Weston's warm laughter filled her ears, muffling the sound of the music.

Finally, she was floating around the room in Weston's arms. "I am so happy that we are married. Do you know why?"

Weston lifted a brow at her coy question. "Because I look dashing in this dark blue evening coat?"

Beth giggled. Weston's wit and humor was just one of the many reasons she was glad to be his wife. That was not what she had in mind at the moment, though. "Unfortunately, no. Now, before you pout, I only say that because I always think you are dashing—yes, even when you occasionally talk with your mouth full of food. Right now, I am happy that we are married so that I can dance as many sets with you as I want without being considered improper."

Weston nodded, his chin dimpling with his thoughtful frown. "I always thought that a silly rule. But then again, when I danced with you previously I was already wishing that we could dance every set. Perhaps the rule exists to prevent lovesick fools like me from monopolizing beautiful ladies' time."

"I wish that I had danced with you more back then, that I had appreciated it more," she said with a wistful sigh. Her eyes dropped from Weston's to his gleaming silk cravat, suddenly ashamed. Though Weston had forgiven her, those feelings were not so easily banished.

One of Weston's hands squeezed Beth's while the other swept gentle circles on the small of her back. "That regret will fade into memory as we enjoy more years together than we were apart."

"I still cannot believe that I—"

Weston surprised her into silence with a chuckle, his eyes so full of unconditional love. He bent so their foreheads almost touched, a gesture that had quickly become one of Beth's favorites. The room

melted away. As far as she was concerned, only they existed in this place and time.

"My wonderful, precious Beth, we will be dancing through life together from now on. There will be more than enough time to make up for anything we lost. Though in truth I do not see it as being lost. It was all part of our journey to finding each other. Please believe me when I say that I truly would not change a thing."

A warm comfort enveloped Beth from head to toe. She saw nothing but sincerity in her beloved husband's eyes. Unexpectedly, she felt her heart easing open, letting go. Wasn't that her problem in the first place? She had been unable to let go of her old thoughts. Yes, everything had worked out in the end, but that tendency had landed her in quite a trying situation first. The corner of Beth's mouth lifted up in a smile, reassured. It was time to let go of the guilt so she could enjoy every moment with Weston to its fullest.

"You are right, darling. I would not change anything either. We love each other now, and will love each other for the rest of our days. That is what matters most."

~

AFTER TWO DANCES in a row in a hot and crowded room, Weston and Beth both found themselves in need of refreshments. They just barely made it off the dance floor and through the crush of other guests clamoring to take their place. Beth fanned herself with a hand and gave a breathless giggle while Weston tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. Before he could bid her a brief farewell to go fetch drinks, she lightly tapped his shoulder and pointed at something behind him.

Mother and Father waved when Weston turned, beckoning them to join. Beth dabbed at her face and Weston tried his best to smooth that one troublesome curl of red hair before heading over. The baron and baroness met them halfway.

"Now, Elizabeth, you are simply stunning!" Mother cried, her eyes roaming up and down Beth's beautiful dress. She spun her finger in a circle, indicating that Beth should mimic the movement. With rosy cheeks, Beth did as she was bid, shyly displaying her deep emerald evening gown for her mother-in-law.

"The two of you dance together so wonderfully," Father added, his

voice booming with cheer. He had been in a remarkably good mood ever since Weston's last weekly visit to their home when he had told them that he and Beth were well and truly in love. Despite their initial tactics to marry Weston off, they were truly happy to see him so happy with a love match of his own making.

Of course, Mother and Father were far more fascinated by their daughter-in-law than the son they had raised for twenty-two years. Weston did not mind at all. Beth deserved all the praise they heaped upon her. It also gave him a chance to slip away to find the nearest footman bearing a tray of much-needed punch.

He had collected two glasses and started on his way back to his parents and wife when a bit of conversation caught his attention. He slowed to eavesdrop on a young lady he recognized from a local family whispering something about him to her friend.

"Doesn't the future Lord Shawberry and his wife look so in love? I can only pray to find the same someday."

"Shh! He's just over there!"

With drinks in hand and a generous smile on his face, Weston turned back to the two girls. "I am sure you ladies will find your own special love just as Mrs. Quincy and I did."

The young ladies, likely still a year or two away from gracing the ballrooms of London, exchanged embarrassed glances. "Thank you, sir," mumbled the first girl, avoiding eye contact.

Weston took another step closer. The happiness he had been floating on longed to burst forth and touch everyone around him. He truly did want everyone to experience this unreal level of joy.

"Allow me to offer some advice," he started. The girls looked from each other to Weston, hesitant and curious. "Do not be afraid if your love comes in an unexpected way. Whether you have an idea of the timing or perhaps the type of man, leave your heart open to new possibilities. That, in my experience, is where the best love stories happen."

Weston turned on his heel, leaving the young ladies to ponder his words of wisdom—hard won from his time with Beth and all that they had been through. Still smiling, he approached his parents and wife. Beth noticed him first, excused herself, and quickly made her way through the crowd toward Weston. She wore a wide, loving smile, a smile reserved just for him.

Beth stopped just before him and took one of the glasses from him, not for the drink itself but rather so she could hold his hand. She seemed to have missed him dearly even though he had only been gone for a minute or two. Of course, Weston felt the exact same. Without letting go of his hand, Beth took a quick sip of her drink.

“I am ready to dance again if you are, husband,” she said, voice lilting with cheer.

Weston could only beam back at her in response. He truly was the luckiest man in the world to have such a wonderful, sweet wife who clearly adored him as much as he adored her. He reminded himself to tell Beth later about the conversation he had with those young ladies who were not so different from how they had been a year ago.

As Beth led them out to the dance floor again, Weston had never felt so blessed to finally be sharing these experiences with his wife. Beth—his perfect match, his best friend, the love of his life—had been so worth the wait.



Beth raced up the front steps of Attwood Manor and then up the main staircase she knew so well. Weston trailed behind, chuckling and occasionally attempting to remind Beth that they would be here for the entire winter so there was no need to rush. She did not slow down. Instead, she burst into the drawing room before the poor butler could finish opening the door.

"Beth!" A chorus of cheers greeted her.

"Welcome to Attwood Manor, Weston!"

Before Beth could take another step into the room, Sophie had sprung up from her chair and blazed across the rug. The sisters threw their arms around each other and squeezed tight as if their separation had been much longer than a couple months. Of course, Beth had written to Sophie in detail about her romantic revelation.

She knew her sister's particularly enthusiastic joy had more to do with Beth's triumphs in achieving her happily ever after than in any particularly strong feelings of longing for her older sister. Beth did not mind that at all. She was so thrilled to be at her grandparents' home with Weston on what almost felt like a second honeymoon. Everything was just so different from the last time she had seen her family. She truly felt like a newlywed now.

"Congratulations once again, Beth. I am so, so happy that it's all worked out just as you wanted," Sophie whispered into Beth's ear, bending down slightly to make up for their height difference.

A mass of dark hair shot past them as Rob launched himself at Weston. He immediately wrapped the man in a crushing embrace. "Brother! We're going to have so much fun while you're here!"

Beth laughed and reached over to pinch Rob's cheek. He recoiled,

smacking her hand away with a disgruntled frown. “You seem to have forgotten that you have a sister as well,” Beth teased.

Rob simply shrugged, ignoring Beth’s statement. “You know I will be taller than you soon and you will not be able to pinch my cheeks anymore,” he announced with pride. He even puffed his chest out a little.

“And that is why we must take advantage of it while we still can,” Sophie said with a menacing smile as she attacked their younger brother with hands poised to tickle.

“Here, Sophie, allow me to assist you in your noble cause.” A deep, humorous voice sounded from behind Beth, making her jump. She turned to see Uncle Dalton striding forward with purpose. He rescued Rob from Sophie’s clutches, only to easily lift the lanky boy in his arms, holding him comically parallel to the floor.

“No! Weston, Hugh, help me!” Rob cried through his squealing laughter.

“Duty calls, my love,” Weston said with a chuckle. He gave Beth a quick peck on the cheek before following after Uncle Dalton, Sophie, and Rob. Hugh came from the other direction, swinging his arms back and forth in front of him as if ready for a fight. The other Harcourt cousins appeared from various corners of the room, never wanting to miss out on any action.

Mama, Papa, Grandmama, Grandpapa, and Aunt Winnie stood nearby. They had come to greet the guests, but had been momentarily distracted by the spontaneous yet unsurprising eruption of chaos. After that giggling and shrieking mass of bodies shuffled deeper into the room, the others turned their attention to Beth. They were all so used to this behavior by now that it quickly faded into the background.

“How wonderful to see you, daughter,” Mama said as she gathered Beth into a deep, much-needed hug. Papa wordlessly joined, wrapping his long arms around them both.

When they pulled away, Beth’s grandparents each offered her a kiss on the cheek and Aunt Winnie gave a brief hug before excusing herself to keep an eye on the shenanigans her husband had played a hand in starting.

“Do you need rest? Or would you like to take a walk about the grounds? The day is chilly but I think it will be manageable if we

bundle up," Papa suggested.

Beth suddenly became aware of the aches and cramps in her body after several days of carriage travel. She massaged the back of her neck, wincing slightly. "I would very much like to stretch my legs, now that I think about it."

"An excellent idea," Grandpapa agreed. "A walk will do this old man some good."

"Children, grandchildren, let's take this boundless energy of yours outdoors," Grandmama called, her regal voice carrying easily through the room and over their ruckus. The younger children cheered and raced for the door.

"Upstairs first! You need your coats," Aunt Winnie commanded.

Despite their grumbles, the children trudged upstairs, the adults save for Beth and Weston following behind them. The couple instead returned downstairs and made their way to the back foyer since they still wore their coats from the ride.

Weston slipped his hand into Beth's. "Your family is a treasure," he said with a half-smile. "An oftentimes exhausting treasure."

Beth lifted a shoulder. "I completely agree."

"Are you happy to be here?"

Beth let her head drop to the side and rest on Weston's shoulder. "Of course. And I am especially happy that you are here with me. I have been eager to show you Attwood Manor. I've spent so many wonderful visits here in my childhood. In fact, this place could be considered the cornerstone of our family."

"I am honored you've chosen to share it with me," Weston whispered. "And I cannot wait to make Hannover Grange and Shawberry Place the cornerstones of our future family."

Beth turned to hide her face in Weston's chest. "I am sure that will happen before we know it."

Hope fluttered in her stomach as she envisioned their children. Perhaps next year or the year after, she and Weston would return to Attwood Manor with another generation of the Harcourt line.

"Are you ready, lovebirds?" Sophie's voice jolted them out of their peaceful daydreaming. Beth peeked shyly over Weston's shoulder to find her family filling the back foyer. She nodded quickly, sending an embarrassed yet amused glance up to Weston.

The family emerged into the welcome sunlight of a late autumn

day. The crisp smell of the changing seasons surrounded Beth in familiarity. She was so glad that they would be spending the entire winter at Attwood Manor together. Even her other aunts and uncles and cousins would be arriving over the course of the next several weeks. For now, Beth enjoyed walking with Papa on one arm and Mama on the other. Weston had gone ahead, matching Rob's eager strides.

"It seems odd to say this months after your wedding, but we wanted to offer our congratulations once more," Mama said as they settled into an easy rhythm behind the others.

"Thank you both for everything." Beth looked from one parent to the other with a grateful smile. "I must confess that just before I finally told Weston how I felt, I imagined what you both would say if you were with me in that moment. That gave me the strength I needed to confront my shortcomings and make things right with my husband."

"You would have always known what to do," Papa said with quiet confidence.

Mama's other hand covered Beth's where it rested on her arm. "We always knew you would find the right man. Weston is just such a joy."

Beth glanced ahead at her husband, his lovely red hair a welcome contrast to the dark browns and sandy blondes of her family. She prayed that at least one of their future children would inherit that gorgeous color. "Yes, he brings me more joy than I ever thought possible."

"Then it is safe to say you are wonderfully, overwhelmingly happy?" Mama asked, the corners of her eyes crinkling.

"That is an understatement," Beth responded with a grin. "I am far happier than I deserve, though Weston makes me feel like I deserve it."

"As he should," Papa said firmly. Beth and Mama both laughed at his attempt at seriousness during such a heartfelt moment.

"Really, Papa," Beth giggled. "I know you adore Weston."

Papa's expression softened. "I adore him because he adores you and cares for you so well."

"Do you mind if I have a word with my dear cousin?"

The trio, thoroughly wrapped up in their own conversation, jumped in unison when Hugh appeared beside Mama. "Of course not,"

she said, slipping her arm out of Beth's. Papa did the same. They hurried off to put some distance between Beth and Hugh.

The younger man offered his arm to Beth and she happily accepted. "You look unusually thoughtful. Is something on your mind?"

Hugh playfully scoffed at this. "Why does your family have such uncanny observation abilities?"

Beth lightly smacked his arm. "They are your family, too, you know."

"Yes, but those traits come from your Waynford side. Besides, I am always thoughtful. There is nothing unusual about it. I simply wanted to ensure that you are well."

"Perfectly well indeed." Beth smiled contentedly into the distance as her eyes remained fixed on Weston, who was now carrying Hayes on his back.

"He is a good man," Hugh agreed. "I am glad that you found what you were looking for in the end."

Beth looked up at her cousin from the corner of her eye. "As am I. And I hope the same for you, even if you have your doubts."

A smile twitched across his lips. "You have actually made me think it could be possible after all. We will see what my first Season next year holds."

"Of course it is possible, Hugh. Anything is possible where the heart is concerned." Beth patted her cousin's arm comfortingly, her mind suddenly throwing her back through memories of her marriage with Weston and their friendship beforehand.

Yes, she had learned that lesson in a rather interesting way. Anything was possible where the heart was concerned. Once, what felt like eons ago, Beth had thought that she had given up her chance at her dream. When she had least expected it, Weston had proven to be her dream come true after all.

THANK you for reading Beth's and Weston's story! If you want to stay updated on my new releases, you can sign up to my newsletter and receive my stand-alone novella, *A Lifetime Of Love*.

If you would like to read my complete Regency Romance series,

The Harcourts, to learn more about Beth's parents you can read them here. You can also read my other series Resolved In Love here.

About the Author

Penny Fairbanks has been a voracious reader since she could hold a book and immediately fell in love with Jane Austen and her world. Now Penny has branched out into writing her own romantic tales.

Penny lives in sunny Florida with her charming husband and their aptly named cat, Prince. When she's not writing or reading she enjoys drinking a lot of coffee and rewatching The Office.

Want to read more of Penny's works? Sign up for her newsletter and receive A *Lifetime of Love*, a stand-alone novella, only available to newsletter subscribers! You'll also be the first to know about upcoming releases!

